

**TRANSGRESSION AND BEYOND:
DAMBUDZO MARECHERA AND ZIMBABWEAN LITERATURE**

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Submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
School of English and Drama
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December, 2003

ABSTRACT

Recent criticism has claimed Marechera's unconventionality represents an anomaly in Zimbabwean literature. Problematically, this implies a fundamental separation of the author from the concerns, styles and strategies of other writers. In this thesis I argue, on the contrary, that Marechera demonstrates a propensity for dialogue with other Zimbabwean writers. Moreover, such a dialogue is crucial to the development of a critical discourse capable of addressing elements of contradiction.

Returning Marechera to the heart of debate in Zimbabwean literature, the thesis focuses on the meaning of his transgressions, alongside selected texts by other Zimbabwean authors. These include Doris Lessing, Charles Mungoshi, Shimmer Chinodya, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Nevanji Madanhire, Chenjerai Hove, and Stanley Nyamfukudza. I also consider the relevance of lesser-known women's writing and queer narratives, and Marechera's meaning to anti-racist, feminist, and gay liberation initiatives.

As a background to my analysis, I ascertain discursive links in an historical sequence of sexual regulation. I argue that the 'black peril' panics in settler society (fear of interracial sex), the rounding-up of single women deemed to be prostitutes in the 1980s, and the anti-gay campaigns of the mid-1990s are all underpinned by a moral discourse which continuously reproduces an ideology of racial, social and sexual hygiene. Marechera's writing refuses this ideology, I claim, but his transgressions are rarely straightforward and frequently misunderstood. His treatment of interracial sexuality deeply problematises conventional concepts and representations of racial identity; his controversial characterisations of women subvert traditional patriarchalist iconographies of womanhood; and his treatment of queer issues (unprecedented in Zimbabwean literature) destabilises assumptions of heteronormativity.

Despite such radicalism, however, Marechera's writing, moving beyond transgression, remains notoriously inconsistent and therefore resistant, I argue, to assimilation by progressive political projects. Although Marechera complicates debates, dialogue with the author is crucial, I nevertheless maintain, precisely for this reason.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without a Westfield Trust Research Studentship, for which I am grateful. I would also like to express gratitude to the following:

- To Zaza Laskowska and Simon Gray for giving me flexible teaching hours at Regent London, and time off for research and writing.
- To Isabelle and Clifford Cartwright, for providing me with accommodation in Harare, enabling my research at the National Archives of Zimbabwe.
- To my mother, Joan, for locating important material and sending it to me from Zimbabwe – and for believing in me. To my father, Syd, and my sister, Tracey, for their continuous kind words of encouragement. To Trevor, my brother – for being a pillar of support at a crucial stage.
- To friends who have tolerated frequent anti-social seclusions, and yet still lent their support until the end; and to graduate students and staff at Queen Mary who have similarly buoyed me along.
- To Nicholas Lamarti, for reading the whole thesis, for bringing it to life with marvellous dialogue, and for proof-reading the chapters – often under the gaze of curious onlookers on London buses!
- To Gabeba Baderoon, for her critical eye, for being a fortress of calm, and for her endless sympathy.
- To Flora Veit-Wild for responding patiently to my numerous questions regarding Marechera; and for making it possible, with the help of Marek Brisinski, against all odds, for me to attend the Versions/Subversions Conference on African Literatures in Berlin in 2002 (after I was initially denied a visa to travel). This was a vital step towards writing-up Chapter Three.

Lastly, I am most grateful to both my supervisors, who have assisted me, both so crucially at critical junctures. To Lisa Jardine, without whose guidance, energising insights, and unswerving confidence in me, this project would never have got off the ground. To Jacqueline Rose for getting me to the end with her wonderfully detailed feedback; and for challenging me to steer straight into the centre of complication – not to avoid it.

For Sandra

INTRODUCTION¹

“I think I am the doppelganger whom, until I appeared, African literature had not yet met.”

Dambudzo Marechera (Veit-Wild 1992: 311)

Dambudzo Marechera, who died from AIDS in 1987, remains an inescapable point of reference in Zimbabwean literature and culture.² He “continues to beckon to myriads of readers from his grave,” writes Chigango Musandireve for *Moto* magazine (1996: 20). In his eulogy, fellow-author Charles Mungoshi states “I [d]on’t want to say, ‘I knew you’, because you are still alive” (Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 13). Others, similarly, have spoken of the author’s haunting presence.³ On the other hand, there has also been a noticeable hesitation in some quarters in acknowledging Marechera’s enduring significance.⁴ Since the author’s untimely death, there have been attempts both to bury and resurrect his controversial legacy in literary and cultural studies. The Dambudzo Marechera Trust posthumously published three volumes of his previously rejected work in 1990, 1992 and 1994. Flora Veit-Wild, who has worked unstintingly to bring the author’s work to the attention of the literary world, and who is generally recognised as his most knowledgeable biographer, collaborated in 1988 with Ernst Schade to produce *Dambudzo Marechera 1952-1987*, a tribute of pictures, poems, and prose. Veit-Wild then published *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work* in 1992. She also organised a symposium on Marechera in August 1995, which reactivated research interest in the author, and resulted in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo*

¹ General Note: page references in the text apply to the author and date just cited, unless otherwise indicated. Original spelling has been kept in all quotations.

² In her essay “Re-categorising Zimbabwean Fiction”, Ranka Primorac discerns three exclusive entities currently comprising literary studies: black writing in the vernacular, white settler writing in English, and black writing in English. She argues “the need to study Zimbabwean fiction in all three groupings systematically and comparatively” (2003: 49). Alternative modes of analysis to those currently segregating the literature are, I agree, increasingly necessary. In this thesis, through Marechera and the concept of intertextual dialogue, I will gesture towards a more broadly inclusive critical practice. By Zimbabwean Literature I mean both black and white writing from the region, before and after 1980, though I accept they belong to dramatically different contexts and there are crucial distinctions to be made.

³ There is a distinct reluctance on the part of many besides Mungoshi to talk about Dambudzo Marechera in the past tense. See eulogies by Poet XX and Robert Muponde (Veit-Wild 1992: 388-389) as well as by Robert Fraser (Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 15).

⁴ Denis Brutus observes: “It is, I think, easy, given his ‘dissolute life’, as judged by many of his more conventional contemporaries (many of whom I found were either uncomfortable discussing him or dismissive of his achievements) to write off his life, his work, and his writing as ‘wild’ (a term I found applied to him in Zimbabwe), but I believe that this is to do him less than justice” (Veit-Wild and Chennells 1999: ix).

Marechera (1999), a wide-ranging collection of essays, co-edited by herself and Anthony Chennells.

This resurgence of interest has, however, also met with sharp criticism. Writing in *Parade* in December 1995, Musa Zimunya states, “I am amused no end when I see university professors and their quislings who wouldn’t touch Dambudzo’s hand with gloves while he was alive now carrying his torch and quarrying for literary treasures in his grave” (Zimunya 1995: 29). He is referring, disparagingly of course, to Professor Flora Veit-Wild and others in the academy who have acknowledged Marechera’s literary estate as permanently relevant to scholarship. This caustic quip is objectionable for several reasons, but I am most interested in Zimunya’s use of metaphor which, in contrast with Mungoshi’s eulogy, suggests Marechera is dead and buried along with his literary legacy - and should be left, as it were, to ‘Rest In Peace’.

Zimunya is not alone in suggesting that closure is now more appropriate for the Marechera legacy. A sizable constituency within Zimbabwe Studies does not agree with what it sees, in Stephen Chan’s terms, as “a sometimes facile scholarly industry” (2002: 182). Chan, a political commentator, notes the importance of Marechera’s *House of Hunger* (1978) in giving Zimbabwe a metaphor for its current condition but criticises

The newly arisen Marechera industry [which] celebrates him not only for his rejection of tired African heroes and his seeming political refusal of the state, but for his post-modernity: a fractured author of fractured writing, stammering in his speech and abandoning grammar in his writing; psychologically at odds with himself and politically alienated from Zimbabwe (182).

Chan’s criticisms of the “Marechera industry” and the unnamed scholars who comprise this entity are problematically non-specific, yet quite confidently disdainful (though polite).⁵ He speaks for a significant swathe of thought in Zimbabwe Studies in expressing preference for a different account of Marechera than that currently offered. What is it that bothers Chan and others? It is partly, possibly, ‘postmodern celebration’. But he also complains that:

⁵ Chan ‘exempts’ Brian Raftopoulos from his criticisms, crediting him with original brilliance in his political studies essay, “Beyond the *House of Hunger*” (1991), for its apt use of the Marecheran metaphor. However, Raftopoulos’s only reference to Marechera, besides the title of his essay, is a single line from the first page of *House of Hunger*. This serves as an epigraph.

What the industry does not deeply investigate is the spiritual cause of fracture within the delicate being of Marechera. Possessed of a spirit, Marechera's mother relieved herself of it by having it ritually transferred to Marechera. The young author never forgave her. He could not cleanse himself of the transferred spirit. It hung within him, and suspended his mental balance in its own esoteric scales (182).

Thus, Chan suggests a more satisfactory reading of Marechera by recourse to a more Africanist discourse, cognisant of spirit worlds, posited against the supposed postmodernism of the "Marechera industry." He observes that "Recent Africanist scholarship has come to insist upon the foundational importance of spiritual linkages with the everyday workings of Africa, and to say that Africa cannot be otherwise understood" (182). This notion is contentious for its totalising implications but here is not the place to interrogate it in detail. It needs stating, however, that though the story of Marechera's alleged curse is intriguing, Chan's recommendation of a more 'Africanised' explanation of Marechera's "mental [im]balance" is problematic, firstly because the story, taken from Veit-Wild's sourcebook, is factually unreliable. Secondly, Chan suggests recuperating the dead Marechera into a cosmological order that the author consciously eschewed while he was alive.⁶ The point is not to discourage research on Marechera's relationship to the African spirit world, but to stress that he resists neat appropriation by this, or any other, epistemology, and in fact problematises the theoretical frame Chan seems to advocate. Grant Lilford, who has researched the issue more carefully, states: "Marechera's writings express conflicts between belief systems"(1999: 283); and the author "points to a new understanding of ambivalence within pre-colonial as well as contemporary Shona culture" (295). Marechera's writing, always layered by complexity, will not be pigeonholed: it demands to be read on several levels simultaneously. Post-modernism, too easily disparaged by many critics, offers a

⁶ On 15 March 2003, in a telephone interview, I questioned Flora Veit-Wild on how this story was obtained. Although the narrative in the sourcebook (Veit-Wild 1992: 53-4) gives the semblance of consistency, it is in fact a carefully edited version of several different, often conflicting, accounts, grafted together from interviews with Michael Marechera, which she conducted along with Fiona Lloyd. They were not able to verify the story of the curse with other family members or relatives. Veit-Wild further added that Marechera himself was quite disdainful of superstition and did not believe in witchcraft at all.

theoretical frame in which a broader reading of the author might be achieved - though it is true Marechera ultimately exceeds explanation within this paradigm.⁷

In essence, it seems that those against the “Marechera industry,” whose sentiments have been expressed to some extent, differently, by Chan and Zimunya, wish to retain a critical distance and are troubled by what they perceive as simple celebration of the author. This, I believe, is an inaccurate characterisation of the *Emerging Perspectives* collection at least – which is a diverse, carefully edited collection of essays, containing not just ‘celebration’ but also, at times, rigorous interrogation of the author⁸, as well as important insights. However, efforts to rescue the author’s writing from damning nationalist criticisms have perhaps resulted in neglect of its more disturbing, problematic elements.⁹ To the extent Marechera has enabled resistance to oppression and forged new possibilities in the national literature, his significance is crucial. But it would be a disservice to literary studies (and to the author himself) to celebrate his contributions uncritically.

Although the anti-‘Marechera industry’ has understandable concerns, it has not really found an unproblematic way of stating them (and is in danger of becoming a “facile industry” itself). In the meantime, attempts at closure, of calling a halt, of shutting down dialogue, continue to have a debilitating effect not only on studies of Marechera, but studies of Zimbabwean literature and culture in general. Partly what I wish to show in this thesis is that it is not necessary to abandon critique of the author and his problematic elements while still appreciating his profound importance to the national literature. Nor is it appropriate, as is often assumed, to terminate dialogue on/with Marechera, who is as relevant now as ever, in order to pursue issues raised by other significant writers. In fact, I will argue the author’s work has an inherent propensity for intertextual dialogue and inevitably, the figure of Marechera will return, invited or uninvited, to literary and cultural debates - perhaps most hauntingly on the subject of identity. The following poem attests:

⁷ See for example Marechera’s ironic reference in “Throne of Bayonets”, a post-independence poem, where the lines “That I resort to the label/ Post-Modernist?” indicate radical self-reflexivity typical of this style, yet also the author’s unwillingness to embrace the label wholeheartedly (1984: 83).

⁸ See for example Dan Wylie (1999) who, in a fictional piece, also resurrects the ghost of Marechera, cleverly setting him in dialogue with N.H. Brettall and George Grosz.

⁹ My own essay in this collection, “Transgressing Traditional Narrative Form”, challenges the dismissal of Marechera on the grounds of his (post)modernism, perceived as “alien to Africa” and lacking “a Zimbabwean authenticity” (Shaw 1999: 17). Although there has been a privileging of traditional realism in writing and criticism, Marechera demonstrates anti-realist alternatives as an equally valid and poignant comment on the Zimbabwean experience.

Identify the Identity Parade

I am the luggage no one will claim;
The out-of-place turd all deny
Responsibility;
The incredulous sneer all tuck away
 beneath bland smiles;
The loud fart all silently agree never
 happened;
The sheer bad breath you politely confront
 with mouthwashed platitudes: "After all, it's
 POETRY."
I am the rat every cat secretly admires;
The cat every dog secretly fears;
The pervert every honest citizen surprises
 in his own mirror: POET.

(Marechera 1992: 199)

As well as offering a permanent challenge to propriety - as in this poem - we will see that Marechera persistently throws up unsettling contradictions. One reason, undoubtedly, for the frequent rejection of his work by publishers, the banning of *Black Sunlight* in 1981 and the current sidelining and censoring of the controversial author from intellectual dialogue, has been profound discomfort with what he has to say. Reactions such as "wild", which can be heard on the Zimbabwe literary scene (Brutus 1999: ix), and also "mad" are surely as much about distancing oneself from that which is disturbing as they are an analysis of the author and his writing. Leonard Murwisi, writing for *Moto* magazine, complains "There is a tendency, even amongst our best academics, to believe that Dambudzo Marechera was mad" (1995/6: 26). Even "Flora Veit-Wild," he states, disappointedly, "seems to believe this" (26). Referring to her comprehensive and acclaimed biography, *Dambudzo Marechera*, he states, "The numerous footnotes which contradict the author's history as he narrated it himself and the personal interviews all harp on the 'mad' psyche" (28). Certainly, Veit-Wild attempts to alert the reader to inconsistencies in the life-story of Marechera as he

narrated it. But drawing attention to these, I think, is one of the biography's great virtues. I am not sure, at all, that by this Veit-Wild meant to suggest a "mad psyche". Nevertheless, it is clear that Murwisi would prefer the story narrated without inconsistencies. This despite numerous accounts that attest to the fact that Marechera was not consistent either in the persona or the writing he presented. Here a crucial point has been missed. Inconsistency ought not relegate him to the category of 'madness' or disqualify him as a pertinent social and cultural commentator. On the contrary, Marechera's penchant for throwing up contradiction is a trademark by which we can recognise his invaluable contribution to literary and cultural dialogue. This feature of Marechera, in itself, is not the problem.

I suggest instead what is noticeably lacking from Zimbabwe Studies is a critical discourse that allows space for the discussion of contradiction. Marechera, I will argue, is indispensable to the development of such a discourse. In his attempt, as he states, to "explore the subconscious of our new society" (Veit-Wild 1992: 39), Marechera has been foundational to psychoanalytically reflexive writing in the Zimbabwean (and African) context, which goes a great distance in this pursuit. In his words: "Some would say the expansion of psychology has had a disastrous effect on twentieth-century literature. I disagree" (1992: 363). Discerning a critical lack of psychoanalytic reflection in African literature, he furthermore asks "How can Africa write as if that Black Frenchman, Franz [*sic*] Fanon, never existed – I refer to the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Mask* [*sic*]." (363). In fact, Fanon's inescapable perceptions form a key theme in several of Marechera's texts. *Black Skin, What Mask*, for example, a short story contained in *The House of Hunger*, which I will later discuss, is an obvious reference. I will argue, however, Marechera goes a step further than Fanon to uncover more unsavoury and unsettling secrets that lie buried in the psychosexual sphere – in an uncensored fashion.

It seems obvious, in view of the above, that psychoanalysis would prove useful to a critique of Marechera's own work. Therefore David Pattison's recent intervention is at first sight most welcome. *No Room for Cowardice: a View of the Life and Times of Dambudzo Marechera* (2001) is the first full-length study of Marechera's complete works, minus the poetry, but it is a disappointing misuse of psychoanalysis. In its framing, the primary focus of the book is the author's 'mental illness', of which his often- obscure creative output is seen as symptomatic. "An Unsettled Spirit" (1), the introduction, and "*The Black Insider and Black Sunlight: Neurosis or Art?*" (115), the

fourth chapter, indicate the style of criticism. “In concentrating on a psychoanalytical approach,” Pattison explains, “I aim to establish more clearly how Marechera’s illness, his life history and his reaction to the various environments he encountered informed his writing” (2001: 42). Unfortunately he pathologises both the writer and his writing, and unduly discredits the usefulness of psychoanalysis in the process.¹⁰ His book effectively turns Marechera into a case study, attempting to ‘explain’ the eccentric author and his writing in terms of a unique “illness”.

For Pattison, this means discounting the author’s significance as a *deliberately* innovative writer: “What some would see as Marechera’s experimentation’,” he states, “was in fact a search for his authentic voice” (192). In other words, according to Pattison, these are not post-modern or any other experiments at all: they are the creative by-product of a seriously ‘ill’ soul driven, in vain, to writing to recover a lost wholeness, an “authentic voice” and, by implication, a lost sanity. This is, I will argue, a serious misreading.

In his heavily autobiographicalised writing-style, Marechera is not trying to recover a lost self and an ‘authentic’ voice but exploring unconscious realities, hidden facets of an ambivalent self, steering away from an essentialist view of identity and calling attention instead to its constructed, changeable nature. Pattison claims Marechera could not produce a cohesive text because of his fraught psychological condition. I will argue instead that Marechera *refused* to write cohesively, that he deliberately and self-reflexively posited the reality of psychic disunity against what he saw as the illusion of coherence in standard realist texts and the realist worldview. The narrator’s doppelganger, dramatising a psychic split in *Black Sunlight*, states, “To write as though only one kind of reality subsists in the world is to act out a mentally retarded mime, for a mentally deficient audience” (1980: 68). The fragmentary form of Marechera’s writing, the anxious self-reflections in the narrative voice, are statements about the fundamentally unstable nature of identity and existence. This is what is so unsettling about the author’s writing, “the pain of self-discovery,” as Musandireve explains it, the fact that “Marechera strikes too close to home for many readers” (1996: 20).

¹⁰ This recalls the problematic readings of some other ‘ghosts’ in literature and culture, Sylvia Plath for example. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, which seeks a less reductive mode of critical analysis, Jacqueline Rose comments that: “There is nothing like the concept of a purely individual pathology for allowing us, with immense comfort, to conjure it all away (her problem, not mine; or, talking about danger as a way of feeling safe)” (1991: 4).

Marechera brings a philosophy of self-reflection to Zimbabwean literature and this translates to a radically self-reflexive narrative form. It seems he inspired this in person as well as in his writing. Those who knew him describe their conversations as memorable, though disconcerting. In his eulogy, Charles Mungoshi says: “Dambudzo, you had a way with me that made me question my own sincerity in my job, my lifestyle and most things I took for granted. You actually were asking me: who am I?” (Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 14). Robert Fraser says: “I never felt closer to myself than when I was with him” (Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 15).

Thus Marechera brings a radical inward gaze to Zimbabwean literature and culture – producing heightened self-awareness, and having a profound effect on both readers and other writers. A frequent critique of the author is his apparent ‘self-indulgence’ (self reflection, I will agree, is taken to the point of excess), but a neglected feature of the writing, I will argue, is its propensity for dialogue – the fact that it is simultaneously oriented inward and outward.

Pattison misses this point in his cursory overview of “Marechera and the Zimbabwean literary Scene”. He concludes, contentiously, that the author is an anomaly whose impact on other writers and the national literature has so far been negligible:

it is difficult to maintain that he had anything other than an implicit influence on other writers, and that probably owes more to the man, his lifestyle and his reputation, rather than to the writer, in that, without exception, the standard conventions of form and content are observed by his contemporaries (Pattison 2001: 233).

There are a number of points of correction to be made here. The “standard conventions of form and content” are *not*, as Pattison claims, “observed by all of his contemporaries”. Chenjerai Hove, in his detour from linearity, and his incorporating forms and inflections of indigenous languages and realities, can also be seen as unconventional – though in a much less transgressive, project.¹¹ Pattison speculates

¹¹ Hove wrote a BA honours dissertation entitled “The Artist/Writer’s Lonely Vision: A Comparative Study of the Portrayal of the Artist’s Social Role in Armah’s *Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments* and *Why are We So Blest?* and Marechera’s *House of Hunger* and *Mindblast*” (Veit-Wild 1992: 405). Hove’s own view of the artist’s role, unlike Marechera’s, is one of social responsibility.

“that the development of black Zimbabwean writing in English would not be any different if Marechera had never emerged” (2001: 238). Too casually, he glosses over the crucial significance of Vera, who has transformed women’s literature, and who sees Marechera as a significant forbear. “Certainly, the comparison has been made and it’s a very welcome comparison,” she states: “I think both of us, Marechera and myself, do have that realisation...there is a challenge there in words, in the alphabet, and what are you going to do, to mould it like clay? And remould it!” (Vekris 1997). Vera speaks of subversions and transformations of language. Her rejection of standard realism, like Marechera’s, is a dramatically transgressive intervention on the Zimbabwean literary scene, though less confrontational, I will argue; and she can be seen, in some instances, as compromising with the prevailing ideology of cultural nationalism.

The “implicit influence” of Marechera is much more significant than Pattison concedes. Marechera also holds an important dialogue, it can be argued, with his contemporary Stanley Nyamfukudza, who is similarly irreverent, though more conventional in terms of narrative form and less confrontational in his transgressions.¹² Nyamfukudza appeared to agree with Marechera, at an early stage, on the importance of establishing space for critical and experimental post-independence literature, and therefore (as an editor for College Press) published the controversial *Mindblast* (1984) - a collection of prose, plays, poetry, parts of which were a stinging satire of bribery, corruption and gross hypocrisy in the new ruling class.¹³

This put Marechera’s experimentalism back on the map in Zimbabwean literature, where it has been a beacon of reference. Charles Samupindi, author of *Pawns* (1992), states “Marechera had a reckless way of approaching things. Reading him affected my own writing a lot. My subsequent writings all tended to be imitations” (quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 299). Pattison also fails to consider George Mujajati’s *Victory* (1993), a forthright critique of the post-colonial dispensation, which breaks linearity and adopts multiple points of view, and Shimmer Chinodya’s *Can We Talk and Other Stories*

¹² Nyamfukudza’s *The Non-Believer’s Journey* (1980), controversially published on the eve of Zimbabwe’s independence, was condemned by nationalist critics for its political ambivalence. But this text is now judged by many to be a classic comment on the war of liberation. Nyamfukudza is a neglected and yet highly significant writer – especially, I venture, for his candid, transgressive, treatment of gender and sexuality in *If God Was a Woman* (1991). This text was published shortly before Vera’s celebrated feminist foray, which appears now, through the volume of critical attention it has received – mostly non-comparative - to have eclipsed most other explorations of gender and sexuality in Zimbabwean literature. See *Sign and Taboo* (Muponde and Taruvinga 2002).

¹³ See Nyamfukudza’s account (Veit-Wild 1992: 339).

(1998), in which, the author declares that he wanted to “test the limits of writability, how much I could put in, how much I could bend the rules” (quoted in Chanetsa 2000: 5). Also, John Eppel “[echoes] the incisive satire of Marechera,” notes Rosemary Gray, often with grotesque realism, and in a polyphonic style (Gray 2003). “Like Marechera before him, Eppel’s is a bitingly honest and unencumbered voice” (2003). Madanhire’s novel, *If the Wind Blew* (1996), and Melissa Tandiwe Myambo’s short story, *Deciduous Gazettes* (1999) are also examples of polyphonic experimentalism, somewhat in the Marecheran tradition.¹⁴

In another misreading, Pattison sees failed attempts to produce a ‘well-made’ narrative as indicative of the author’s troubled psychological condition rather than the result of conscious experimentation – a search for an ‘authentic voice’ and a flawed grip on reality, rather than literary craftsmanship. I read the author’s fragmented form, the mixing and matching of genres, the unfinished quality of his work, as ostentatious inconsistency. Marechera was not struggling, yet failing, to achieve psychic unity through writing, but accepting this as given, and exploring fiction as a medium of exploration and expression of changing identities.

The expression of the individual voice, through writing, cannot be compromised with Marechera. It is strange therefore that Pattison discerns a dilemma in the author between “the desire to become a ‘useful citizen’ within a socialist republic and the desire for self expression at all costs. Or as Georg Lukacs puts it, ‘between an aesthetically appealing, but decadent modernism, and a fruitful critical realism’” (2001: 192). Although there is always deep consideration of aesthetic issues in Marechera’s work, I observe no such dilemma. In fact, *Mindblast* explicitly protests the idea of ‘artist as functionary’ at a moment in Zimbabwe’s history when Soviet-styled socialist realism was being promoted as the official literary aesthetic. Despite the pressure to do so, he refused, in no uncertain terms, to “write socialist realism, write about things that will build our people” (quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 34). Marechera described the atmosphere of the 1980s as such:

¹⁴ Marechera can also be linked with South African writers. Veit-Wild writes about “Carnival and Hybridity in Marechera and Lesego Rampolokeng” (1999: 93-104). Grant Lilford examines “Allegories of Drought and Gardens in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee and Dambudzo Marechera” (1996). China Mieville quotes a passage from Marechera’s *Black Sunlight* in his epigraph to *The Scar* (2002), suggesting an indebtedness to a surreal imaginative landscape carved out by the author.

Officially there is no policy for literature. There is no law which says you can't write about this or about that. But there is a heavy political atmosphere whereby every writer is aware of the national programme which unofficially does not allow certain things. So you have a situation where writers are censoring themselves very heavily (quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 39).

Rejecting the idea of the writer as a social worker, instead he asserts radical ambivalence. The first stanza of his poem, "The Bar-Stool Edible Worm", expresses the sentiment:

I am against everything
Against war and those against
War. Against whatever diminishes
Th'individual's blind impulse
(Marechera 1992: 59)

Such controversial statements champion the value of the individual's right to freedom of expression at all costs. In Marechera's case, this entails wilful inconsistency. Despite his inconsistencies, however - or because of them - I will argue, Marechera nevertheless comments insightfully on the nature of identity and the crucial function of literature.

Literature, Politics and Identity

There is arguably no greater issue in literary discourse than that of identity. It has saturated Zimbabwean literature from the outset, it formed the title of George Kahari's pioneering early piece of criticism *The Search for Zimbabwean Identity; An Introduction to the Zimbabwean Novel* (1980) and it continues to feature as a theme in Rino Zhuwarara's more recent *Introduction to Zimbabwean Literature in English* (2001). Political commentators in Zimbabwe Studies are becoming increasingly aware of the wider importance of literature,¹⁵ and many in literary and cultural studies are aware that on questions of identity Marechera means something important, though conventional critical discourse has so far struggled to say what this is. The crucial point

¹⁵ Hence Chan's foray into the field. He comments that: "The Zimbabwean novel (and novella) are far more potent expressions of the political condition than Zimbabwean scholarship" (2003: 121). See also Chan (2003: 124, 125, 182) and Raftopolous (1991).

made by Marechera is that identity is a fiction that can be constructed and deconstructed just like fiction. This has, potentially, seismic social, cultural and political implications. Ato Quayson has written insightfully about “Literature as a Political Act” with particular reference to Africa. He states that:

Both the discourse of literature and that of politics in Africa are caught up in the processes of defining and establishing parameters for individual agency in contexts where such agency is constantly in a state of flux.... [B]oth political and literary discourses are at war over the instruments of authentic agency, and, beyond that, of social legitimation...(2000: 90).

To promote ideology and wield authority, regimes need to shape subjects and fix identities as far as possible. Literature is often exploited in this process, and Zimbabwe is a casebook example. Here imaginative literature has long been regarded, potentially at least, as an ideological implement, and Marechera, the quintessential dissident, has been on the vanguard of resistance.

Historically, the governments of both the former Rhodesia and the present Zimbabwe have monitored imaginative literature with a keen and wary eye, attempting to co-opt and shape it as an instrument of social regulation, to reinforce public policy or to consolidate national ideals, or reprimand it (through various forms of censorship) in the event that it strays too far from the official line. The Rhodesia Literature Bureau was set up by the colonial administration and established one of the most prolific bodies of vernacular writing in Africa prior to Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, but Marechera claims it was deliberately created “to promote a certain kind of Shona and Ndebele literature which would be used in the schools and perpetuate the idea that racism is for the good of the blacks” (Veit-Wild 1992: 38). He adds, “we had writers who were writing the very books Ian Smith wanted the blacks to read” (38).¹⁶ The Smith regime was of course swept from power, along with its ideology of white privilege, and replaced in 1980 by the Mugabe government, which promised a more egalitarian society. Though Marechera supported the struggle for majority rule, he nevertheless retained a critical distance from the new establishment, warning in *South Magazine* that:

¹⁶ Other writers have made similar criticisms. In her social history, Veit-Wild notes that the Literature Bureau “had been established in order to prevent the emergence of critical political literature”(1993: 74).

Writing can always turn into cheap propaganda. As long as he is serious, the writer must be free to criticise...When Smith was ruling us here, we had to oppose him all the time as writers – so, even more, should we now that we have a majority government. We should be even more vigilant about our own mistakes (Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 19).

But Marechera's views were unpopular in the early 1980s. Nation-building, according to a specific government blueprint, was the order of the day, and criticism was not well tolerated. "The idea that a writer should always be positive, that's always being crammed down one's throat" (19), he complained. In fact, the new regime also saw literature as an ideological implement. Emmanuel Ngara and Fay Chung, influential thinkers on education policy, advocated a Soviet Union-styled socialist realism for a new national literature to match the new nation's Marxist-Leninist, scientific socialist aspirations. They proposed to involve the Zimbabwe Writers' Union in "mobilising writers to adopt a progressive outlook and to promote socialist ideas" (Ngara and Chung 1985: 116). They explained that "By providing ideological guidance, making funds available and creating an atmosphere conducive to genuine artistic production, the Party and Government can encourage progressive creative work" (116-7). Horrified at the implications of a state-monitored literature in post-independence Zimbabwe Marechera wrote *Mindblast* - a thorough indictment of the new dispensation and an outright rejection of prescriptive models for writing in service of the regime.

The Prologue to "Grimknife Jr's Story" evidences a foray into fantastic realism, in experimentalist style:

Grimknife Jr and Rix the Giant Cat

... Rix was the Reorientation Officer. Rix was the head of this establishment. Grimknife Jr was the mental delinquent who had been dragged here to be reorientated. Grimknife Jr was angry; he could not quite grasp what his crime was. Rix chuckled, an odd purring sound that matched the slow approach of darkness.

"Well, Grimknife, we are in this together. I'm here to help you. Help you become a useful citizen."

"What's that – a useful citizen?"

“Someone who does what he is told. Someone who says exactly what others say. Someone who is the spitting image of Duty, Responsibility, and Patriotism.”

Grimknife Jr looked blank.

“You’re still talking rot, Officer Rix,” he muttered.

“I must say this attitude won’t do you any good. You’ll change. They all change in the end.” Rix held up his claws, stretched, yawned.

“But I haven’t done anything,” Grimknife Jr protested.

“That too is a crime,” Rix said.

“Not doing anything is a crime?”

“We are all expected to contribute to the P.E.”

Grimknife groaned. When was Rix going to stop talking about the infernal Progressive Effort? He had been talking about it for months now. Or was it years?

...

(Marechera 1984: 45)

The giant cat obviously represents the Zimbabwean State and the P.E. its absurd new dogma. This foray into fantastic realism was not taken seriously by the literary establishment when it was written. Now, at a time of brutal dictatorship in Zimbabwe, where six million people face the prospect of starvation¹⁷, where ‘re-education programmes’, arrests and torture of the opposition are routine; where the media has been subjected to strict state control and *The Daily News*, the only independent daily, has, as of 12 September 2003, been removed from circulation; where the outspoken author George Mujajati “is the most tortured writer in this country at the moment” (Hove 2001: 11), *Mindblast* has an eerily prophetic ring to it.¹⁸ It grows in relevance, as do other anti-realist texts by Marechera, who declared, “For me the point is if one is living in an abnormal society then only abnormal expression can express that society. Documentary cannot” ([Veit]-Wild 1988: 134). This point of view, of which *Mindblast* is exemplary – seems an especially pertinent aesthetic question at the moment I write this thesis. Can linear documentaries really account for such a cruel, bizarre, in many

¹⁷ Much of this is clearly politically motivated. Documented proof exists that government agents have deliberately cut off emergency food supplies to suspected members of the opposition.

¹⁸ Chenjerai Hove, himself a persecuted writer, now in exile, states, “He [Mujajati] cannot sleep in peace in his own house. And the violence against him means he is supposed to fall silent, to disappear as it were” (2002: 11).

respects absurd situation? It was a question that needed to be raised in the early 1980s, at a time when the Mugabe government (though still being celebrated at home and abroad) was perpetrating unspeakable atrocities in the province of Matabeleland in an attempt to eliminate 'dissidents' - a reality that was simply buried. This is a question that needs to be raised now - again. How will Zimbabwean writers find expression for the current hardships and human rights abuses that continue to scar the national psyche? Marechera's unflinching exploration of the unconscious – both on a personal and national level – coupled with his unfettered experimentalism, his radically self-aware style, proposes a possible route.

Marechera's writing, I will argue, has dramatically ruptured the boundaries of what is considered possible in post-independence Zimbabwean literature - calling up a critical, though not necessarily typical, reader. This makes the author a formidable opponent of tyranny and a focal point of resistance in the national literature at this juncture in Zimbabwe's tragic history of oppression.

Hayden White states:

...It is obvious that any society, in order to sustain the practices that permit it to function in the interests of its dominant groups, must devise cultural strategies to promote the identification of its subjects with the moral and legal system that "authorizes" the society's practices (1987: 86-87).

It should perhaps come as no surprise that both the Rhodesian and Zimbabwean governments have attempted to exploit imaginative literature as an instrument of ideology in their particular visions of nation-building. Certainly they are not unique in doing so. As Benedict Anderson observes in *Imagined Communities*, works of literature, particularly novels, have always helped to create national communities. "Fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality," he says, "creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (1983: 40).¹⁹ Jonathan Culler explains that: "In so far as we become who we are through a series of identifications...novels are a powerful device for the internalisation of social norms" (1997: 93).

¹⁹ Also see Timothy Brennan's "The National Longing for Form" (1990: 44-70).

Critical or subversive literature, such as Marechera's, can also, however, be a site of resistance to ideologies and authorities. As Stewart Crehan observes: "In subverting the myth of the unified nation and the unified subject ... the writing becomes aware of its own self-difference" (1999: 271). Marechera's subversion of narrative form demonstrates a refusal of the "wise grip of the nation state and its ideological state apparatuses" (1999: 279). While the official national narrative of Zimbabwe, with its obsessive emphasis on unity and homogeneity, and its brutal intolerance of dissent, has sought a 'national psychic cohesion' at all costs, Marechera has persistently subverted this in his texts. *The House of Hunger* and numerous other texts graphically attest to the author's rejection of the very notion of psychic cohesion in the individual subject. The unstable form for which Marechera is famed is linked with his notion of unfixed identities, as Anthony Chennells notes in his essay "Unstable Identities, Unstable Narratives in *Black Sunlight*" (1999). In their essay, "Fictional Autobiographies or Autobiographical Fictions?" Melissa Levin and Laurice Taitz observe:

Identity is constructed and formed in the process of writing...[:] autobiography is an attempt to produce and determine life...In his fiction, Marechera exposes the instability of identity by creating characters that are representative of fragments of the author's persona...The reader is immediately made aware of this": (1999: 164-5).

The construction and deconstruction of identity in fiction, and through it, inevitably reverberates beyond the world of the text. Marechera crosses between fiction and autobiography with unsettling easiness, fictionalising versions of himself, or autobiographicalising his fictions to the point that a neat separation of fact and fiction proves impossible. But the process and its implications are more complex than Pattison and other critics have allowed for, as Crehan states:

Not only are the narrator and author not "the same person"...person, author, and narrator are ontologically separate beings. It is this recognition – namely, that a healing closure or stitching together of these different 'selves' into a unified self is impossible – that makes Marechera's writing so radically self-aware (1999: 271).

Destabilising the ideologies of imperialism, nationalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity, Marechera depicts an infinitely changeable reality, where personal identity is in a perpetual state of flux. For Marechera, writing is the interface between conscious and unconscious realities, the medium through which identity is deconstructed and reconstructed, then deconstructed again – a perpetual process, and one through which individual agency is asserted. Sexuality is an indispensable component of this process; and Marechera brings deep, uncensored, reflection on the psychosexual to Zimbabwean literature. This point is crucially significant, I will argue, for progressive movements such as anti-racism, feminism, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) liberation. However, as we will see, Marechera also severely complicates identity politics and the ethos of liberation movements.

It barely needs stating that an oppressive patriarchal, heteronormative, society exists in Zimbabwe. Feminist and LGBT liberation movements have sprung up in resistance. Feminist and queer theory continue to reiterate the crucial point that gender and sexuality are not ‘merely natural’ but contingent and discursively shaped. In this regard, they hold key significance in Zimbabwe, where cultural commentators and intellectuals have, only recently, identified the need to document a history of sexuality.

Critical discourse currently lacks a comprehensive study of the importance of sexuality, most especially transgression, in Zimbabwean literature - a glaring omission that this thesis begins to redress. Also conspicuously absent from Zimbabweanist scholarship, notwithstanding the important sociological, historical and legal contributions on sexuality of Diana Jeater (1993), Elizabeth Schmidt (1992), Oliver Phillips (1997; 1999) and Marc Epprecht (1998a; 1998b), is a serious consideration of its *psychical* dimensions. In this regard, Marechera says something extremely important that has not yet been adequately articulated and brought to the attention of Zimbabwe Studies. I identify this as a gap in current literary and cultural criticism and in this thesis attempt to state the author’s significance. I do so by situating Marechera in dialogue with other key authors.

Transgression is a focus in this dissertation because it reveals fractures in an otherwise rigidly racially contoured, patriarchal, heteronormative system - contradictions to dominant fictions of identity. As Marechera states, “We are a very sexually active nation, but we hide that under the guise of an obscure notion of a national

morality”(1984b: 5-6). For his part, iconoclastically, he propels sexuality and so-called ‘perversion’ to the forefront in many of his texts. The ‘perverse’ body of his writing performs a number of transgressions: it places classic masculinity under the microscope and, with sexually transgressive female characters, it also contests assumptions about womanhood. It destabilises patriarchal certainties regarding gender roles and, with the trope of interracial sex, it questions concepts of identity in terms of race. Rejecting the ideology and fiction of heteronormativity, it raises crucial questions regarding sexual orientation, many years ahead of its time in the Zimbabwe context. For Marechera this translates to an aesthetic that is anti-ideology, which refuses closure and resists assimilation into any totalising hegemonic or moral order. As we will see, however, he goes beyond the brief of what transgression ordinarily implies.

I define transgression as subversion of the dominant order of race and class, of patriarchy, and of heteronormativity. In particular, in this thesis, I examine interracial sex, feminism, homosexuality, cross-dressing and other clear deviations from normative versions of masculinity and femininity. This includes prostitution, inasmuch as it subverts traditional masculine controls over female sexuality and threatens marriage customs.

In *Sexual Dissidence*, Jonathan Dollimore cautions:

we should never expect transgression or subversion miraculously to change the social order. If transgression subverts, it is less in terms of immediate undermining or immediate gains, than in terms of the dangerous knowledge it brings with it, or produces, or which is produced in and by its containment in the cultural sphere. This is the transgression...that seizes upon and exploits contradictions and which, as a political act, inspires recognition first, that the injustices of the existing social order are not inevitable - that they are, in other words, contingent and not eternal; second, that injustice is only overcome by a radical transformation of the conditions that produce and sustain it; third, that all such transformations are at the cost of destructive struggle (1991: 88-9)

Dollimore’s observations are insightful yet still problematic. Transgression is neither consistent nor, necessarily, progressive – as he implies. Moreover, as I will emphasise, it cannot be simply seen as a straightforward response to, or rejection of, the social

sphere. Although it is true to say that psychic disturbance is socially fuelled in some way, Marechera problematises this connection. In his writing, as we will see, transgressions occurring on a psychic level, frequently throw up disturbingly grotesque realities that are inconsistent with progressive projects, and often inexplicable within current analytical paradigms. He remains Zimbabwe's most challenging writer, inasmuch as he moves beyond transgression and embarks on a project which literary criticism has not yet properly acknowledged, nor found appropriate expression for.

The thesis argues there is a symbiotic relationship between literature and sexuality, of which Marechera seems acutely aware at an early stage in his writing. As Jonathan Culler explains, "literature is one of the places where [the] idea of sex is constructed, where we find promoted the idea that people's deepest identities are tied to the kind of desire they feel for another human being" (1997: 8). One of the most important mechanisms by which patriarchy and heteronormativity are upheld is the 'dominant fiction'. Kaja Silverman explains this concept as a matrix of representational and signifying practices acting to affirm the ideology of the status quo:

the dominant fiction not only offers the representational system by means of which the subject typically assumes a sexual identity, and takes on the desires commensurate with that identity, but forms the stable core around which a nation's and period's 'reality' coheres (1992: 28).

Thus sexuality is central to a nation's sense of itself and the world of the text is crucial to the construction of sexual identities.

Overwhelmingly, the dominant fiction in Zimbabwe, which articulates itself through a wide variety of visual and written texts (and most crudely through the state-controlled media) functions to affirm classic masculinity and a patriarchal, heterosexual normativity. Of course normativity is an ideologically-steeped concept, upheld, in Louis Althusser's terms, by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Literature, particularly when it is promoted or censored by the state, and selected for school syllabi, functions as one such ISA.²⁰ Referring to Althusser, Silverman explains that

“Ideological belief...occurs at the moment when an image which the subject knows to be culturally fabricated nevertheless succeeds in being recognised or acknowledged as ‘a pure, naked perception of reality’”(41). This is most noticeably problematic, as Marechera points out, when literature is exploited to affirm a racist ideology. But feminist accounts, such as Rudo Gaidzanwa’s *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (1985), and the writings of Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera, have also alerted us to the problematic naturalisation of patriarchal ideology in the dominant fiction. Equally, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community in Zimbabwe is now challenging the dominant fiction of heteronormativity and homophobia, as we will see.

President Robert Mugabe has declared homosexuals *persona non grata* and coordinated an anti-gay campaign in Zimbabwe since 1995, backed by the state-controlled media. This began with the banning of the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe organisation from exhibiting at the International Book Fair in Harare that year – an event that demonstrated the crucial significance of the world of the text as a site for the construction and deconstruction, as well as the expression of sexual identity.

Zimbabwe is “a country very paranoid about sex and politics,” according to Marechera (1984a: 138). This comment made in the early 1980s has remarkable resonance today. Sex is still a taboo topic in many forums of African literature and Marechera’s direct treatment of sexuality, many years ahead of its time, has been considered shocking, though the response has been somewhat muted. This perhaps reflects a general reluctance to talk publicly about sex. However, following its politicisation by Mugabe since the mid-1990s, sexuality is now recognised as a major constituent of Zimbabwean identity – a comparatively new development. Frank discussions of sexuality in Zimbabwe are currently inescapable, not least because of the devastating AIDS pandemic raging throughout southern Africa, claiming thousands of lives; and several other authors are now writing more daringly and openly, despite cultural taboos, on the

²⁰ With Silverman I agree the concept of ideology still provides a vital tool to Marxist, feminist and gay studies. Unfortunately Althusserian theory was abandoned by many in the academy before the arrival of queer theory and before its profound implications for questions of sexuality were fully explored. Although this moment has been surpassed in the Anglo-American academy, the Althusserian concept of ideology remains strikingly pertinent to present-day Zimbabwe.

vitaly important subject of sex.²¹

Outline of the Chapters

I have arranged the chapters in this thesis so as to highlight the historical context of sexual regulation and transgression - a tension the literature considered responds to - and to demonstrate a continuum in opprobrium for 'deviant' sexual behaviour. A discourse of social and moral hygiene has prevailed in the dominant ideologies and the dominant fictions of both Southern Rhodesia and independent Zimbabwe.²² Social opprobrium for sexual transgression starts, most notably, with the 'Black and White Peril' panics - a fear of racial and cultural 'contamination' through interracial sex - in white settler society in the early to mid-twentieth century. The discursive pattern reverses itself, under Zimbabwean nationalism, traditionalist and ethnocentric movements, into a fear of cultural contamination by 'Western vices'. This informs the ideology of state-sanctioned round-ups of single women deemed to be prostitutes in the 1980s, the condemning of feminists, and the anti-gay campaigns in the mid-1990s. It also accounts, in part, for the stigmatisation of those suffering from AIDS. The significance of Marechera, as we will see, is that he radically, deliberately, subverts moral discourse in all its pernicious guises. In this regard, the chapters highlight the author's relevance to issues currently pertinent in literary and cultural studies. They are intended to stimulate debate – vitally inclusive of Marechera.

Chapter One examines interracial desire, interracial sex and interracial relationships in a number of key texts. It begins with a comparison of the treatment of this theme by Doris Lessing in *The Grass is Singing* and by Marechera in *The House of Hunger* and a number of other texts. Situating this transgression in the context of the 'Black and White Peril' phenomena of Southern Rhodesian settler society, it explores forbidden interracial desire. I argue both Lessing's and Marechera's texts complement one another to raise fundamental questions about the significance of interracial sexuality and how

²¹ See especially Stanley Nyamfukudza's *If God was a Woman* (1991). Nyamfukudza, like Marechera, has been candid about sexuality ahead of his time. See also Shimmer Chinodya's *Can We Talk and Other Stories* (1998). Also, Yvonne Vera tackles rape, incest, child abuse, infanticide and self-abortion in her fiction, while at the same time developing a feminist erotics.

²² The currently dominant concepts of immorality and perversity in Zimbabwe are not entirely indigenous, as is usually assumed, but were brought in the late nineteenth-century by Christian missionaries and colonialism. Before that, as Diana Jeater states in *Marriage, Perversion and Power: the Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia*, "The concept of private morality, applied to acts in isolation from their consequences, was entirely alien" (1993: 37).

personal identity is configured in this context. I combine the questions of Freud and Fanon to ask: What does the white woman want? and What does the black man want? and compare Lessing's and Marechera's insights.

Following in Fanon's footsteps, Marechera shifts "the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism" (Bhabha 1986: xxiv). However, his narcissistic reflections prove an effective weapon in the battle against internalised racism. The "politics of narcissism", according to Homi Bhabha, is to confront the condition of the "depersonalised dislocated colonial subject" - always "overdetermined from without" (xxii-xxiv). Marechera clearly refuses an externally imposed racial identity – although he concedes great difficulty in the refusal. Rejecting the narratives of both colonialism and nationalism, Marechera simultaneously inhabits and deconstructs predominant concepts of black male identity. In seeing desire and sex and love across the colour bar primarily as a personal issue, focusing more on psychic than social processes, more on the internal than the external, Marechera poses a unique challenge to postcolonial thinking. Thirty years on from Lessing's groundbreaking first novel on the issue, Marechera asks not only: What is the taboo and why does it persist? but also: How do racialised attitudes towards sex become internalised? and How best does one confront internalised racism? Both Lessing and Marechera, I argue, effectively use interracial relationships to challenge colonial depersonalisation.

In his treatment of interracial sexuality, his destabilisation of standard accounts, his fetishisation of the white woman on the one hand, yet expression of misogyny and feelings of internalised racism on the other, Marechera's narrator demonstrates an ambivalence of mind. However, he transgresses the colour bar in such a manner as to question, quite radically, perceptions of racial difference, to fracture straightforward constructions of identity on the basis of race in the dominant fiction. In this respect, by calling up some of the most discomforting components of psychosexual identity, Marechera goes beyond transgression.

Chapter Two demonstrates that the narrative of nationhood, which predominates in Zimbabwe, is one that casts women subserviently. In the patriarchal-nationalist imagination, feminism, like prostitution, represents corruption and cultural contamination, seen to originate in the West. Independent women suffer stigma because they are frequently considered interchangeable with prostitutes and feminists, hence the

notorious 'prostitute' round-ups of the 1980s, where thousands of single women found themselves in detention, accused of this transgression. This harks back to the 'black peril' scares, where an anxious white settler society tried to maintain racial hygiene. Zimbabwean patriarchy, consolidating itself under cultural nationalism, views female sexuality and women's bodies as the potential conduit of cultural contamination – hence the renewed efforts at regaining control.

Feminist writing struggles under such circumstances. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, black women have historically been marginalised in the publishing industry, and problematically represented in literature. However, women's writing is beginning to challenge the dominant patriarchal fiction. I argue Marechera is a crucial though problematic forbear for feminism in the Zimbabwean context and make the case for critical dialogue. Despite undeniable instances of misogyny and phallocentrism in his writing, I argue he nevertheless offers much to feminist discourse. I illustrate this point in comparing Marechera with Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, and a wide range of other lesser-known women writers. Much women's writing from Zimbabwe, en route from the prescriptive forms of the Rhodesia Literature Bureau, where it had its origins, tends to find itself caught between nationalist and socialist realist tropes. This limits the possibilities of exploration and experimentation. Marechera shows a propensity to complicate and debate pertinent issues of gender, and this is important to an emergent feminism.

I argue that while Marechera's writing is anti-patriarchal, it is not recognisably feminist. While it is sharply critical of male domination and supportive of female emancipation, it is nevertheless patently, self-consciously, misogynistic. As well as suggesting, once again, an unfixed, unstable concept of femininity and womanhood, and subverting gender certainties in the dominant patriarchal fiction, these contradictions show how transgression in Marechera cannot always be unequivocally assimilated to an emancipatory vision.

Chapter Three considers queer sexuality and Marechera's significance on this subject. In cultural terms, I analyse the current wave of homophobia, following Mugabe's anti-gay hate speeches, showing once again that this occurs in the continuum of the racial-sexual hygiene discourse. 'Gay peril' can be compared with 'prostitution peril' and 'black peril'. However, the 'gay peril' phenomenon is a recent development in

Zimbabwe. I consider reasons for the erasure of homosexuality from the dominant fiction in Zimbabwe prior to 1995, and the significance of the emergence of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered writing since then. I argue that Marechera, the first black Zimbabwean writer to address the issue of homosexuality (in 1978) is crucially significant because he destabilises heteronormativity in the dominant fiction. More so than any other author, he demonstrates why literature is vital to questions of sexual orientation and vice versa.

I analyse his treatment of homosexuality in several texts, comparing these with more recent narratives by Stanley Nyamfukudza, Charles Mungoshi and Nevanji Madanhire, which have all broken the silence on homosexuality. I further examine Marechera's fracturing of classic masculinity, comparing this with recent writing by Shimmer Chinodya and Stanley Nyamfukudza, who explore masculine fear and vulnerability in the AIDS era. With Marechera, classic masculinity goes under the microscope, and sexual orientation is unhinged from its usual heteronormative markers. Masculine identity is shown to be fundamentally unstable, and this is cause for anxiety in the texts analysed. While his writing is anti-heteronormative, I nevertheless discern that it cannot necessarily be classed as either pro-gay or homophobic.

Lastly, I move to the figure of 'the transvestite' in an analysis of Marechera's neglected but profoundly relevant play, *The Alley*. Here he takes the trope of queerness (dramatised by the cross-dressing Rhodes) beyond transgression, and does so with radical ambivalence – subverting the idea of stable and cohesive identities.

I argue that the arrival of visible homosexualities in Zimbabwean literature is of crucial importance to literary, cultural studies, as well as an emergent 'queer' studies, and that dialogue with Marechera, though complicated, promises to broaden anti-heteronormative critical discourse. As yet this is conspicuously absent from discussions of Zimbabwean literature and undeveloped in Zimbabwe Studies in general.

In conclusion, I will argue Marechera continues to have a profound influence on the direction of Zimbabwean literature in that he raises inescapable questions of identity as well as form and style. I contend his enduring legacy is the polyphonic narrative, radically self-questioning, continuously contradictory, but always amenable to dialogue. He is important to cultural and political as well as literary discussions, especially at this

moment, because he is a formidable voice of resistance against totalitarian abuse. Moreover, he speaks poignantly about dislocation and the fragmentary, frequently contradictory nature of personal identity. This is pertinent in Zimbabwe, which has recently experienced unprecedented dislocation following the Mugabe government's controversial 'fast-track' land reform and resettlement programmes, which have been accompanied by politically motivated violence. Dislocation is the experience also of those who have fled the country, the economic and political refugees who now comprise a huge diaspora. Marechera offers key insights on the nature of selfhood in a world where the normative markers of identity are rapidly disappearing. He is a crucial figure to return to, I will suggest, as millions of Zimbabweans, at home and abroad, struggle to find their way in the modern world.

CHAPTER ONE: TRANSGRESSIVE INTERRACIAL SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

One thing is certain. Sex is at the very heart of racism.... From New Orleans to New Guinea, from Barbados to Bulawayo, from Kimberley to Kuala Lumpur, the quintessential taboo to be explained is the white man's formal objection to intimacy between black men and white women. Granting political equality was perceived as giving freedom for black men to go to bed with white women, and in the American south or in southern Africa that stuck in the gullet.

Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality* (1990: 203).

When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952 [1967]: 63)

['W]hite civilisation' ...will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it.

Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (1950: 30)

The thousand eyes of the street were looking down on our necks, staring, speculating, making judgements. A black man in arms with a white woman was still something of a miracle in Harare. The acid comments and bitter glances spat at us from both black and white people.

Dambudzo Marechera, *Mindblast* (1984: 131)

Interracial sex, or just the idea of it, particularly between a white woman and a black man, has long been considered taboo in the colonial context. Contesting the racism that surrounds this, Stanlake Samkange's classic novel, *The Mourned One*, details the magnitude of the transgression:

What is your crime? Did you ask? I will tell you. My crime is that I was found asleep, dead drunk, on a white woman's bed. It was then said I had legally,

though not actually, raped the woman. In this country, it is a crime, punishable by death, for a black man, such as I am, to make love to a white woman; let alone rape her, legally or otherwise, even though the law permits a white man to use and cohabit with as many black women as he likes. Yes, this is the law of Southern Rhodesia in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and thirty-five. This is the crime for which I stand condemned and for which I must now lose my life (1975: 2).

These are the words of Ndatshana, whose actual life-story Samkange claims to have transcribed, from a manuscript bequeathed to him. In Zimbabwe, ‘crimes’ such as the above have long ceased to be prosecuted. Yet it is plain that the taboo of interracial sexuality outlives the repeal of draconian legislation. It is a trope that deeply permeates the national unconscious, and one that therefore requires not only a sociological explanation but also a psychoanalytic one.

Surprisingly, the psychical dimensions of this transgression remain largely unexplored in critical dialogues within the field of Zimbabwe Studies – to the detriment of a deeper understanding of the current crisis that besets the country.²³ This in spite of the fact the interracial sex trope returns time and again to Zimbabwe’s troubled political arena. In his demands for money from the British Government for land reform (but also for cynical self-serving political point-scoring, many argue), Robert Mugabe has accused Great Britain of neo-colonial domination - supporting the interests of a tiny white settler population, owning and farming, until very recently, most of Zimbabwe’s arable land. During the 2000 and 2002 elections, marred by widespread violence, this issue became central and Mugabe staked his political career on it.

Referring, at Africa Day celebrations in Namibia on 26 May 2000, to the controversial seizures of white-owned land by force, he declared:

²³ In *Robert Mugabe: A Life of Power and Violence*, for example, Chan (2003) does not attempt to analyse the premier’s racialised-sexualised use of metaphor. Yet “power and violence” in colonial and post-colonial contexts – as Fanon so importantly demonstrates – always assume psychosexual dimensions, and discussion of these, I contend, is crucial to a proper grasp of the current conflict. Contentiously, Chan irons out evidence of contradiction, arguing instead for consistency and rationality in the premier and his policies. The element of excess in Mugabe’s racist and homophobic invectives – obvious evidence of deep-seated psychic anxiety – is downplayed or ignored in Chan’s narrative.

It is a simple solution...If other neighbouring countries have problems similar to the ones we have encountered, why not apply the same solution as Zimbabwe...If they [the white commercial farmers] are ready to discuss with you and give land then there is no need for a fight. But in Zimbabwe the British are not ready and we are making them ready now...A boyfriend can accept a No from a girlfriend, but a freedom fighter can never accept a No from an imperialist (*World Africa* 2000).

The analogy of the assertive boyfriend and reluctant girlfriend demonstrates that land in Zimbabwe (and the region) exists in the political imaginary as a sexualised metaphor. Woman (i.e. the “girlfriend”) is the battleground in a contest between nationalism and colonialism, symbolic of the land to both. The imperial idea of conquering and subduing the land (figured as Woman) is reversed here by Mugabe, who appears instead to be advocating the symbolic rape and re-conquest of the white man’s land (i.e. “the girlfriend”, the white woman). In this discourse, a type of reverse racism intertwined with misogyny, land is seen as the masculine privilege of the black “freedom fighter” (i.e. war veteran), now mandated by the president to re-conquer this birthright - by whatever means necessary.

At another political rally the premier declared, “Our party must continue to strike fear in the hearts of white men, they must tremble” (quoted in Hunter et al. 2001: 32). With such statements, Mugabe draws deep-seated racial animosities to the surface, charging political discourse in a highly problematical way. The (alleged) rape of the two (white) nieces of the then Commercial Farmers Union (CFU) chairman by (black) ‘war veterans’, at the onset of the campaign to occupy white-owned land, drove his point home to the white farming community in symbolic fashion. The interracial sex trope has clearly re-emerged in Zimbabwe’s troubled political sphere; and Mugabe’s use of language evidences its complex dimensions. The psychosexual, I suggest, should be a key consideration in finding a deeper understanding of the current conflict.

Herein lies Marechera’s significance. His depiction of sexual behaviour provides crucial insights into the unconscious of a racially divided nation, fraught with contradictions. Marechera takes the trope of interracial sex out of the national unconscious and puts it onto the pages of literature, showing its continuing relevance. This chapter considers interracial sexuality with special regard to Zimbabwean literature – where it has not yet

extensively been investigated, but where such an investigation could yield key insights (also for critical discourse in Zimbabwe Studies more broadly). Primarily, I will follow the shifting trope of interracial sexual transgression in the writing of Marechera, who has written most extensively and challengingly on the topic, but I will situate the author and discuss his significance in a broader context of Zimbabwean literature. The author is transgressive in so far as he violates the interracial colour bar but he does more, goes further than the term transgression implies. Marechera considers not just the social and legal implications of interracial sexuality – which is where the investigation ends with most other writers. For him it is a personal identity issue, which provokes deep self-reflection on the manner in which black masculinity is constructed. Marechera's first person narrator reasserts individual agency over hostile racist forces that have tried to shape and construct him. Like no other Zimbabwean author, Marechera explores the manner in which *internalised* racism operates in actual interracial sexual relationships – as well as in desires, dreams and fantasies.

As we will see, Marechera takes Fanon's famous metaphor, quoted in the epigraph, and 'lays it bare.' Disentangling himself from other popular perceptions of black men and white women, Marechera attempts to move beyond standard treatments of the trope of interracial sexuality. Fanon states: "In no way should my colour be regarded as a flaw. From the moment the Negro accepts the separation imposed on him by the European he has no further respite...We shall see that another solution is possible. It implies the restructuring of the world" (Fanon 1967: 81-82). Marechera, in agreement with Fanon it seems, works towards such a 'solution' in the pages of his fiction. But of course once one starts to restructure the world – whether in fiction or reality - there is no limit to what one might uncover. A unique attribute of Marechera is his absolute refusal to censor his explorations. This element of his writing is simultaneously exciting and dangerous. As he states:

No one censors your dreams, no matter how horrible or macabre they are. But if you start acting out your dreams in real life, if you start translating your thoughts and your dreams into action, that's when society moves against you in terms of the police, the army or the secret service (Veit-Wild 1992: 31).

Through rigorous self-reflexivity on the theme of interracial sexuality, I will argue, Marechera imagines alternative identities, relationships and dynamics beyond the

current deterministic, racialised structures. His writing is powerfully anti-racist on the one hand. However, particularly in his representations of women, he steers into apparent misogyny, explores the macabre and grotesque, and resists the appropriation of his transgressions by a simplistic anti-racist, anti-sexist progressive politics.

1. The Theme of 'black and white peril' in Lessing and Marechera²⁴

I begin by juxtapositioning Doris Lessing and Dambudzo Marechera, considering both the social and psychoanalytic perspectives the authors alert us to on the subject of interracial sexuality. Although the writers are generations apart, there are a number of parallels between the two, and their texts complement one another in an oddly symmetrical manner. In fact, both read and commented on one another's work. Lessing, in her review of *The House of Hunger* for *Books and Bookmen* in June 1979, wrote:

The book is an explosion...Writer and book are both of the nature of miracles...It is no good pretending this book is an easy or pleasant read. More like overhearing a scream...Marechera has in him the stuff and substance that go to make a great writer (quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 187).

Lessing then wrote the back cover blurb for the Pantheon edition of Marechera's first book: "From the first page you have to salute a formidable talent...his rage explodes, not in political rhetoric, but in a fusion of lyricism, wit, obscenity." (quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 191).

An intertextual dialogue continues between these two authors, as I will now illustrate. Visualising the dialogical link is a photograph of Marechera posing in front of a book cover of *The Grass is Singing* (appended to the thesis).²⁵ Both Lessing and Marechera explore race relations in a deeply divided society, examining sexual desire and intimate relationships across the colour bar, with particular attention to the ultimately subversive combination of a white woman and a black man. Both explore the fears and tensions associated with the interracial sex taboo, and both examine the manner in which domination, subordination, and depersonalisation occurs in colonial societies. The point of focus is somewhat different however. Whereas, primarily, Lessing addresses the question, "What does a white woman want?", Marechera, primarily, writes in answer to

²⁴ In the interests of style, I have dropped the inverted commas from 'black peril' and 'white peril' after their first mention in this chapter. I have done the same with other racially charged words such as 'native' and with problematic words such as 'Society', which really means white society in Lessing's novel.

²⁵ The photograph is copied from Veit-Wild and Schade's *Dambudzo Marechera 1952-1987* (1988).

the question, “What does a black man want?”²⁶

In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing’s question is part of a puzzle in a complex murder mystery, concerning an erotically charged relationship between a white woman, Mary, and her black servant, Moses. The mystery launches an investigation into complex psychic processes at play in the mind of the main character, Mary, where Lessing suggests a psychological malfunction at the core of her descent into madness. Marechera’s question, on the other hand, is one that launches a personalised and highly subjective investigation. In his poetry and prose, the speaker or narrator (usually a fictionalised version of the author himself) is his own analyst, probing his own psyche, and asking what does *this individual* black man want?

The Grass is Singing, according to Lewis Nkosi, is “a book...which grows in importance as time passes” (1995: 76). Published in 1949, it is the first novel to highlight tensions, connections, and contradictions between race, gender, sexuality and land in the Zimbabwean context. The current land crisis in Zimbabwe underscores its continued significance, in that it provides clues to the underlying sexo-racial tensions.²⁷ Before I begin with Lessing’s groundbreaking novel, however, the social phenomena of ‘black and white peril’, require a more detailed explanation.

Black peril was the name given to the perceived danger of black men wanting to have sex with white women. White peril on the other hand was the perceived danger of white women tempting black men to have sex with them.²⁸ White male-dominated settler society was anxious about white women, held as emblems of white civilisation, succumbing to black men and therefore becoming vessels of contagion and

²⁶ Both operate within a psychoanalytically-reflexive framework; and my allusions to Freud and Fanon are intentional. Freud, according to Ernest Jones, “once exclaimed to Princess Marie Bonaparte, “*Was will das Weib?* - What does woman want?” He presents his answer in “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes” (Gay 1989: 670). Fanon, on the other hand asks “What does a black man want? What does the black man want?” in his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967: 10).

²⁷ Literature from the region continues to revisit this site of tension. The acclaimed author Yvonne Vera does so in her short story, “Crossing Boundaries” (1992) - strongly reminiscent of Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*. Although she similarly tackles racial domination and master-servant relationships, she does not, however, touch the taboo subject of interracial desire. The South African writer J.M. Coetzee does, however, in his provocative post-apartheid novel, *Disgrace* (1999) which, like Lessing’s novel, also deals with sexual transgression and the land conflict.

²⁸ In fact ‘Black Peril’ theoretically included the threat of black women wanting to have sex with white men, and ‘White Peril’ theoretically included the threat of white men wanting to have sex with black women. The ‘danger’, ostensibly, was miscegenation. Nothing is stated about sex between black and white men or black and white women, but homosexuality, illegal under Roman-Dutch law, fell into the different category of ‘unnatural offences’, and was heavily penalised.

racial/cultural degeneration. It therefore enacted laws to prevent such liaisons. Although the law has never ultimately succeeded in regulating sexual behaviour and has widely been flouted, it nevertheless documents the attitudes and anxieties of a ruling establishment, and the severity with which black and white peril were once regarded.

In colonial Rhodesia, following precedents in South Africa, laws were passed, dating back to 1903, to deter black men and white women from engaging in sexual relations. Black men who had sexual relations of any sort with a white woman faced imprisonment with hard labour for five years. White women who voluntarily had sexual intercourse with black men faced imprisonment for up to two years.²⁹ There were no such deterrents for white men consorting with black women, which was a sore point with white settler women's groups and African chiefs, who lobbied unsuccessfully for a change in the law.³⁰

White male settlers defined black and white peril and legislated against them. The following report by Superintendent Brundell of the Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.), writing in 1915, illustrates the mindset of the establishment.³¹ In it Brundell states:

It is necessary to define and differentiate between 'Black Peril', and by this I mean the following:-

- (1) The actual commission of the crime of Rape on White females.
- (2) Assault with intent to commit Rape on White females.
- (3) Indecent assaults, acts or overtures, or molesting white females for the purpose of exciting or satisfying bestial desires.

And 'White Peril' which I may classify as follows:-

- (A) White females who prostitute themselves with natives for the purpose of monetary gain...
- (B) The indiscreet and careless attitude adopted by white females in their personal relations with their native male servants which undoubtedly leads to

²⁹ This is tabled in Section 3 of the *Immorality and Indecency Suppression Ordinances* of 1903 and Section 1 of the *Immorality Suppression Ordinance* (No.9) of 1903.

³⁰ See Phillips (1999: 129); Jeater (1993: 160) and Barnes (1999: 95-112).

³¹ Brundell was commissioned to write a report on 'Black and White Peril' in Southern Rhodesia, which contributed to the passing of even more draconian legislation in the form of the *Immorality and Indecency Suppression Ordinance* of 1916 (Phillips 1999: 113).

undue familiarity bordering on license to which many actual attempts to commit sexual crime must be attributed.

- (C) 'Nymphomania'. A well known condition which takes the form of hysterical curiosity in sexual matters, in many cases due to inherent temperamental qualities of the individual, although in some instances when the condition is not inherent the climatic effect on the human produces the same form of temporary hysteria. (Brundell 1915:1-2).³²

Significantly, the report does not consider the real possibility of *consenting* interracial sexual relations: no white woman in her right mind was considered capable of consenting to sex with a black man, hence the attempt to define female 'curiosity' in such sexual matters as hysteria. Brundell's definition of white peril applies to *The Grass is Singing*, where Mary Turner would be guilty of offences B and C. Moses, her 'houseboy', is perceived to be guilty of at least one of the black peril offences listed.

Further laws were enacted in 1916 to 'protect' white women from the prurient gaze of the African men, who could be prosecuted for "the raising or opening of any window, blind, or screen of any room, or the trap door or flap of any privy, for the purpose of observing any woman, or girl who may be in such a room in a nude or semi-nude state.." (Section 4 (1916). Oliver Phillips sums up the hypocrisy surrounding this law:

For Europeans to gaze studiously at the labia of black women was rationalised as educational, and represented as the 'scientific' study of the 'atavistic' anatomy of primitive people. In other words, black women become an 'object of study' for white subjects, thereby reinforcing black women's absence of subjectivity. Whereas, where a black man gazed upon the sexual anatomy, or even upon on the body, of a white woman in a 'naturalist' or intimate setting, this was seen to reverse the ordained positioning of subject-objectification and objectify white women, reinforcing the subjectivity of black men. The irony of this is that in articulation this law, white legislators implicitly construct white

³² The "Immorality Personal Files" at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) contain a 1916 Confidential Circular entitled "Illicit Intercourse Between European Males and Native Females" drawn up by the CID (Criminal Investigations Department). There are many entries but hardly any prosecutions. The documents indicate that prostitutes and those guilty of interracial sex were usually caught out on the charge of "supplying natives with liquor" rather than the actual 'crime'.

woman as an object of desire for black men, and therefore collude in the fetishisation of white woman as an object of desire (1999: 115).

Phillips suggests attempts to regulate sexuality in this manner may actually have produced the behaviour and attitude they were meant to deter, while the real danger of sexual abuse posed by white men to black women, although far more widespread, was simply ignored.

Jealousy, by white men, of the supposed sexual prowess of African men possibly underlies the black peril phobia. Elizabeth Schmidt explains:

While proclaiming that black men were like animals, unable to contain their sexual passions, white men discreetly covered their own deep feelings of sexual inferiority. For the sake of 'white civilisation' and the survival of the colony, it was essential that European men maintain their dominance and authority in all spheres - political, economic, social, and sexual. It was the lurking fear that perhaps they were not in complete control that caused white men to fear black men so totally (1992:170).

Intermittently, in the period of white settler rule, Rhodesian society panicked about black peril. "The possibility that a white woman would have a human relationship with a black man, and could even be sexually attracted to him, was a notion that was brutally repressed" (170). Transgressors, if they were caught, were periodically scapegoated. Louisa Newman, for example, a white prostitute discovered to have taken a black client, was tarred and feathered and run down the streets of Bulawayo in 1902 (Phillips 1999: 117). Such exposures and shamings indicate not only profound social anxiety but a determined attempt to stamp out intimacy between white women and black men.

It is curious, considering the scare stories of the early twentieth century, that white Rhodesian settler novels do not, on the whole, dwell on black and white peril. Anthony Chennells notes that blacks are largely invisible from this literature because there was a perceived gulf between black and white, and "most novelists imaged sexual relations between Blacks and Whites in such a way that implicitly or explicitly the existence of

the gulf continued to be affirmed” (1982: 378).³³ Nevertheless, miscegenation was commonplace - belying the myth; and it was mostly due to the white men’s relations with black women.³⁴ The young Englishman, Tony Marston, in *The Grass is Singing*, notes that “in a country where coloured children appear plentifully among the natives wherever a lonely white man is stationed, hypocrisy ...was the first thing that struck him on his arrival” (1950: 230).³⁵ However, white novelists could accommodate this apparent contradiction within the ideology of colonial patriarchy:

If sex is regarded as a man’s *domination* of a woman, White men taking Black women as partners did not fundamentally challenge the myth. In novels where Black women are shown as wholly submissive to White men, or as mere animals, the myth of the gulf is actually enforced. (Chennells 1982: 382).

But:

The domination of a White woman by a Black man opposed everything that the myth stood for. By insisting that White women were infinitely remote from the advances of Black men, the settlers ensured that the myth remained unchallenged (382).

As Chennells points out, sex was imaged within the narrow parameters in Rhodesian patriarchy: *domination* was the issue and this provides us with useful interpretive access to the phenomena of black and white peril in Lessing’s classically subversive novel. Other well-known novelists such as Gertrude Page and Cynthia Stockley, whose novels transgress the norms of gender and sexuality, quite shockingly in many respects, as notes Marion Walton (1997), nevertheless tend in their treatment of black and white peril to affirm the gulf between black and white (Chennells 1982: 378). Lessing is the

³³ Chennells further notes that “Settler mobs may have made, or pretended to make, the inviolability of their women a sacred trust, but the women novelists scorned so passive a role in the building of the new country” (1985: 41).

³⁴ In this regard, double standards prevailed. Although most cases of miscegenation occurred between white men and black women, this was not illegal and white men were rarely prosecuted even for the most obvious cases of coercion or rape. See Pape (1990: 699-720).

³⁵ In the first two decades of British South Africa Company (BSAC) rule in Rhodesia, sexual liaisons between white men and black women were commonplace. This was at first condoned by settler society because there were very few white women in the territory. White women were not permitted to enter the territory on the first pioneer columns because it was considered too wild and dangerous. Probably, a fear of ‘black peril’ accompanied this. They were greatly outnumbered by white men until the 1920s, when they finally increased to roughly forty percent of the settler population. By the 1930s they accounted for the usual fifty percent.

first white author to seriously call this rift into question in a novel that shakes the sexual-racial certainties of southern Rhodesian society to the core.

1a. *The Grass is Singing*

Lessing begins her book with the following newspaper article.

MURDER MYSTERY

By Special Correspondent

Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning. The houseboy, who has been arrested, has confessed to the crime. No motive has been discovered.

It is thought that he was in search of valuables
(Lessing 1950: 1)

This mystery, and a quest for answers, frames the novel. The murder and the reaction to it are followed by a flashback narrative recounting the story of Mary's earlier life: growing up unhappily in a poor rural family; having a happier independent life as a single young woman in the city; being pressured into an unsuitable marriage; moving back to the country (Ngesi) with Dick Turner; struggling to exert control over her African servants on the farm; suffering from a mental illness induced by the tensions; and eventually having a nervous breakdown. Most significantly, we witness her developing a curiously intimate relationship with the last of her houseboys, Moses. Finally, at the end of the novel, the narrator takes us back - full circle - to the scene of the murder, to show us the events in slow motion.

The piecing together of clues in a search for a solution to the "Murder Mystery" takes the form of a detective narrative, where the main investigator is a young white man, Tony Marston, just out from England. However, the mystery is not the murderer but the

motive, as Claire Sprague has also noted in her analysis of the novel (1987).³⁶ Moses was not “in search of valuables” at all. Everyone, in the district at least, knows this is just a smoke screen to obscure the real motive, which cannot be talked about in public, for reasons best known to this particular community. The article, which speaks for (white) ‘Society’, is also, effectively, issuing a warning about what could happen to unsuspecting white women who are unaware of ‘dangers’ posed by black men.

The fact that Lessing frames her first novel within the heated issues of black and white peril, underscores its importance to a specific social context, about which it comments provocatively. Responding to a society which refused to acknowledge intimacy across the colour bar, Lessing flouts the myth that white women are “infinitely remote from the advances of black men” (Chennells 1982: 382) and exposes a chink in the armour of colonial ideology. Scandalously, *The Grass is Singing* more than challenges the myth of separation: in fact it depicts the ‘affair’ between Moses and Mary as her sexual awakening. Through Moses, she discovers herself as a sexual being.

In Salisbury, as a spinster, we are told, she liked “men friends who treated her like a good pal, with none of this silly sex business” (Lessing 1950: 47). Was she prudish, simply disinterested, or possessed of some deeper, more profound anxiety? She seems to have been put off the idea of sex from childhood. Though not much is said about this, the novel hints at trauma as a result of her witnessing something unsettling: “She felt sentimental at weddings, but she had a profound distaste for sex; there had been little privacy in her home and there were things she did not care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago” (46). Discarding her own caution, (“none of this silly sex business”), she looks for a husband herself. However, when a promising engagement develops between her and a fifty-five year old widower and he tries to kiss her, “a violent revulsion overcame her and she ran away.” (50). Mary is a complicated

³⁶ Conventionally, as Frankie Bailey (1991) notes, the detective novel genre investigates crime from a white male perspective, with a white detective. Black men are usually the suspects, never the investigators, while white women are most commonly the victims. Rudolph Fisher, for example, with *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932), calls this genre into question. In a sense we have the classic detective novel format here. However, Lessing’s narrator significantly problematises a standard male-dominated reading of the story within the genre. It becomes apparent that Tony Marston’s investigations will not result in a satisfactory explanation; and that our ‘search for the truth’ will not be completely successful through this *modus operandi*. I wish to acknowledge Colette Guldemann’s unpublished research on black detectives in popular South African fiction, which has been informative of my analysis.

individual whom Tony Marston later describes as “A case for the psychologist” (228).³⁷

We also know she is not attracted to her husband Dick, with whom sex is a duty rather than a pleasure, but is she repelled by all men generally or just a certain type? Before succumbing to the pressures of a heteronormative society, which insists on marriage, Mary is entirely happy in an exclusively female environment. Her intimacies are with other single women at the women-only boarding hostel where she feels comfortable and at home. Sexually, Mary does not seem attracted to men at all - at least not white men, but she is seen as a harmless misfit - at first. With Moses, however, things are different: he appears to trigger her sexual awakening:

She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful broad-built body fascinated her. She had given him white shorts and shirts to wear in the house, that had been used by her former servants. They were too small for him; as he swept or scrubbed or bent to the stove, his muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split. He appeared even taller and broader than he was because of the littleness of the house (1950: 175).

Although she “would have died rather than acknowledge...some dark attraction,” Mary is forever gazing at his strong masculine form; “sometimes,” we are told, “she caught a glimpse of him bending over a [tin of hot water] sluicing himself, naked from the waist up”(176). The erotic imagery is unmistakable. Mary is quite obviously turned on by what she sees. What may seem harmless voyeurism to us nowadays could, however, have been condemned at the time as white peril - “hysterical curiosity in sexual matters” (Brundell 1915: 2). Her curiosity is checked sharply by a society that will not allow it, but which does not need to invoke the law because the powerful taboo also operates as a psychic prohibition.

Beneath Mary’s feelings of sexual attraction is of course the fear of black peril induced by society. The ‘mystery’ of black men derives from a lack of personal contact: “Her

³⁷ Freud’s “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (‘Dora’)” seems relevant here (Gay 1989: 172-239). In her fraught relationships with men, Mary shows some of the same ‘symptoms’ as the troubled Dora. Like Dora, the possible homosexual element in her life, her obvious preference for the company of women rather than men, appears similarly to have been overlooked in Marston’s (and the narrator’s) final ‘diagnosis’.

mother's servants she had been forbidden to talk to" (70). For Mary, the black man becomes synonymous with the socially-constructed imago of black peril:

She was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be. In her childhood she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive, lowered, but matter-of-fact voice she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her (70).

So Mary's attraction for Moses is overdetermined from the start by powerful taboos that militate against it. In an oddly contradictory way however, which Lessing manages to capture in the text, Mary's fetishisation of Moses is simultaneously encouraged and brutally repressed by social and psychic forces.

Behind black and white peril, however, lies the issue of *domination*. As a woman on the frontier (a remote farm in Ngesi), Mary attempts to establish her independence, to assert herself, as other white women have traditionally done, domestically: "she would be her own mistress: that was marriage, what her friends had married for - to have homes of their own and no one to tell them what to do" (62). Managing the household effectively is where white women demonstrate their worth in this society. This means establishing full control over the servants. However, the forces of patriarchy ultimately work against Mary here. Charlie Slatter who "personified Society for the Turners" (15) says, "[it] [n]eeds a man to deal with Niggers. ...Niggers don't understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right place" (27). From the outset, Mary's battle to disprove the Slatters of Society is considered naïve and futile.

In an attempt to assert her authority in the household, she sacks one houseboy after the next for petty offences. Some are overworked and underpaid until they leave of their own accord. One 'boy' spends days scrubbing a zinc bath (actually impossible to clean), even going without his midday meal on one occasion. When Dick intervenes, however, she furiously defends her position as household matriarch, saying, "It's my house...He's my boy, not yours. Don't interfere" (95). Within this society, Mary is permitted a measure of authority in the realm of domestic space. Unfortunately, it is at the expense of her African servants. Her description of the domestic workers - grown men - as her boys indicates the mechanics of domestic domination. As 'madam', Mary

plays the role of a dominant Mother, demanding unconditional obedience from 'her boys'. In Mary's case, the Mother-Child relationship cannot be sustained, and in fact is later reversed. In the case of Moses, an uneasy situation develops whereby she - a frail white woman - positions herself so as to dominate a massive muscular man, by virtue of her race. Gradually she begins to realise this.

Mary explores power and discovers the transition from the role of 'Madam' to that of 'Baas' (Mistress to Master) is not as easy as she imagines. When Dick becomes gravely ill, and Mary is utterly frustrated with his failure as a farmer (synonymous in this society with his failure as a frontier man), she tries to perform the role of 'Baas'. When it is left to her to manage the farm, she moves quickly to assert her authority over the workers - in much the same way as she has done at home, except that here she tries her hand at wielding the sjambok (a masterly phallic symbol), which Charlie Slatter describes as *the essential* for farming. One of the workers - who turns out to be Moses - finds himself on the receiving end of Mary's newfound phallic power when he stops work from thirst and exhaustion. Mary succumbs to an uncontrollable anger:

Involuntarily she lifted her whip and brought it down across his face in a vicious swinging blow... He was a great hulk of a man, taller than any others, magnificently built, with nothing on but a sack tied round his waist. As she stood there, frightened, he seemed to tower over her... In a voice that sounded harsh from breathlessness, she said, 'Now get back to work.' For a moment the man looked at her with an expression that turned her stomach liquid with fear... She was trembling with fright, at her own action, and because of the look she had seen in the man's eyes (147).

Chennells claims this as a turning point because "In her moment of fear, and in her subsequent recognition that Moses hates her, Mary unwillingly acknowledges his capacity for human emotions" (1985: 42). Paradoxically, in trying to subordinate Moses on the basis of racial difference, she nevertheless fractures the structures of racial separation.

The physical imbalance between Moses and Mary highlights the absurdity of racial domination in this instance: Moses could quite easily overpower Mary, yet she can command him with the crack of a whip. It is a precarious position of authority that relies

on the threat of violence; violence that could quite easily be, and soon is, reversed. Interestingly, Lessing describes Mary's actions as involuntary, as though some outside force automatically determines her extraordinary behaviour. This echoes Frantz Fanon, who argues that both the master (in this case the mistress acting as the master) and the slave are enslaved, the one to his superiority and the other to his inferiority, and that both "alike behave with a neurotic orientation..." (Bhabha quoting Fanon 1967: xiv).

Two types of 'enslavement' persist in Mary's case to contradict one another in this situation. Try as she may to step into the shoes of the white male 'Baas', Society continues to remind her "No woman knows how to handle niggers..." (216). As a woman, her hold on power will always be in question. Therefore, on the one hand she is enslaved to her 'superiority' because she is white, while on the other hand she is enslaved to her 'inferiority' as a woman. The one seems to negate the other. Accordingly she gives up her attempt to outdo her husband as a farmer and returns to the house. This society will permit her some measure of dominance in the domestic sphere, but in fact she will later lose her grip on authority in the household too, and with it will go the fragile sense of self-identity she has constructed as a housewife.

Also undermining Mary's position of authority and sense of self identity are the forces of sexuality. Although she is attracted to Moses, she cannot dominate him sexually. Rather, she fears being dominated herself. This contradicts and compromises her role as 'madam'. Mary obviously admires Moses physically and is seduced by his sexual presence. We do not know if the reverse is true because we are not given access to Moses's thoughts. However, the evidence suggests he does establish a close bond. Because he dresses and undresses her with her consent, we can assume a level of physical intimacy between the two.

Here, Mary becomes guilty of white peril: she is perceived to have put herself in a compromising position, and encouraged unwarranted intimacy from a native, thereby supposedly endangering the guarded position of other white women. Society censures such behaviour silently but forcefully. Mary's actions are frowned upon by even the supposedly more enlightened young English observer, Tony Marston (who takes it upon himself to play the private investigator). The narrator explains:

He had been in the country long enough to be shocked... But then, he had read enough about psychology to understand the sexual aspect of the colour bar, one of whose foundations is the jealousy of the white man for the superior sexual potency of the native; and he was surprised at one of the guarded, a white woman, so easily evading this barrier (230).

With his accusing glare, Marston returns the racial dynamic to an otherwise very human encounter. It is here that Lessing introduces different vantage points, various ways of 'seeing' the event. To the innocent onlooker, Moses is simply helping a very ill woman to get dressed. He is the modern equivalent of a care-worker or personal nurse. But Marston, now accustomed to the ways of Southern Rhodesia, recognises the sexual element and interprets Moses's intentions as black peril. Mary is similarly accused and, suddenly shamed by the censoring gaze of a white man; she finds herself jolted out of the intimate relationship with Moses back onto the side of one of her own race. Leaning over Tony's shoulder she tells him in the Madam's voice to "Go away" (230). Marston realises that in trying to assert herself: "she was using his presence there as a shield in a fight to get back a command she had lost. And she was speaking like a child challenging a grown-up person" (233). Moses had in fact been performing the role of parent in nursing Mary like a sick child.

When Marston arrives and disturbs the role-playing, the issue becomes one of domination once again, Mary still feeling compelled to regain control of herself and to recapture her lost sense of identity as a 'white woman' in this society by regaining control of her servant. Bewildered and confused, she speaks in different voices, which represent the conflict continuing inside her head. She asks Tony, "Why did you come here? It was alright before you came" (233). In fact it was. It is the presence of a white man (looking for a 'crime') and his horrified gaze that triggers the identity crisis, a corresponding switch in allegiances, and a reversal in the power dynamics. Mary had quietly submitted herself (like a needy child) to the intimate care and affection of Moses before Tony's arrival. Once he accuses her of white peril with his disapproving glare, this is no longer possible and she has to react by choosing either him or Moses, a white man or a black man. Society persuades her to choose the white man, and instructs her to reassert herself as 'Madam'. This is a role we already know she cannot sustain. Like an automaton, however, she simply plays the part, as if she has no control over her own actions. At the same time we know and she knows her betrayal of Moses will have

disastrous consequences. With this gesture, she has denied their intimacy and rejected Moses as an equal human being. In effect, Mary herself now casts her loyal and compassionate nurse back into the imago of black peril and pretends to see him, like Society, as a social and sexual menace: in an unforgiveable manner, she now depersonalises Moses. All this to make things right with the young idealist Tony Marston, a white man, playing the private investigator in search of a crime, and following a predetermined formula where the villain is a black man and the victim the white woman.

In order to resume some dignity in the eyes of the young white man, she must recreate distance and re-exert authority over the servant. The intimate human connection between Moses and Mary has been shattered in a second by the disapproving gaze of Marston. She cannot reconcile the close personal relationship she has developed with Moses with her social obligation as a white woman that disallows it. However, she has gone too far and it is now too late for her to re-establish herself as Madam or matriarch. In short, she cannot perform the contradictory roles that are required of her: hence the nervous breakdown. This eventuality indicates the impossible position of many white women in Southern Rhodesian society: while Mary can never know, apparently, “how to control Niggers,” this is nevertheless what she is expected to do, if for no other reason than to reinforce racial boundaries.

But there are conspicuous gaps and silences in Lessing’s narrative. Her third person narrator only has access to selective viewpoints and selective pieces of information. We are denied the opportunity to see the situation from Moses’s point of view. This remains a mystery even to the narrator, who almost apologises for her lack of omniscience. While Lessing’s analysis takes us on a journey into Mary’s mind and examines her trauma quite closely, there is not, unfortunately, a corresponding journey into Moses’s mind; only innuendo as to what he seems to think, seems to mean, and seems to symbolise. Our analysis of the whole affair excludes the all important perspective of a black man.

Why does Moses murder Mary? Is it to avenge his mistreatment? Is it to restore a lost masculine identity? Or, in Fanon’s sense, is it to strike a blow at white civilisation itself? There are few clues in the text, and the room for speculation is endless. Does Moses manage to reverse the pattern of domination and submission in this final act of

protest (if it is an act of protest)? Clearly, 'Society' feels that he has. That is what is so scandalous; he has managed to exert dominance over a white woman and the real motive for the crime must be obscured: hence the Special Correspondent's comment: "it was thought he was in search of valuables." Settler Society is profoundly shaken by a houseboy overpowering his white madam in this manner. For Moses, this white woman possibly represents white civilisation and all that belongs to the white man that oppresses him. However, since the character of Moses is drawn somewhat two-dimensionally and the narrative does not give us access to *his* thoughts, any form of detailed analysis remains problematic and unsatisfactory.

Only speculation is possible - which is why the headline 'Murder Mystery' is appropriate. Perhaps Moses arrives at the conclusion that only violence will redress the power imbalance. Just as Mary once used a sjambok (phallic power) to cow him into submission, Moses now fashions a piece of metal as his weapon to kill her: it is not a sudden crime of passion, but a carefully deliberated act. What is Moses thinking? Is he tired of being objectified as Other, of being silenced into submission by the 'baas' and 'madam', and feeling completely betrayed by the woman he has shown deep affection for? Is he consciously rebelling against colonial oppression? If he is, then he does so with strategic accuracy by striking it where it is most vulnerable. Possibly as an act of defiance, he embodies the black peril that society imagines and fears.³⁸ We are told that "Moses, letting her go, saw her roll to the floor" (254), and we might imagine him at the same time watching the guarded possession of white patriarchy toppling to his feet momentarily. The murder could be read as the ultimate revenge in depersonalisation. Or it could be seen, despite its premeditated nature, as the ultimate crime of passion. Could this be, for Moses, as well, a desperate expression of love, as well as hate?: "Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say." (Lessing 1950: 256).

There is another murder in the novel, which is not investigated, however: I refer to Moses's pending execution (because there is little doubt that he will be found guilty, hanged, and made an example of). We can also ask, therefore, what is the motive for Moses's 'murder'? - that is to say by society, in the judicial sense. Is it tit for tat

retribution? Or is it meant to send a message to other black men possibly considering the same crime?

Strangely, the fact that Moses has slain a symbol of white civilisation has afforded him recognition. He is despised, yet admired in a curious sort of way. Thus awkwardness results, after his arrest, when transport arrangements are made because:

they could not put Moses the murderer in the same car with her; one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead, and murdered by him [yet]...[t]here seemed to be a feeling that Moses, having committed a murder, deserved to be taken by car; but there was no help for it, he would have to walk, guarded by the policemen, wheeling their bicycles, to the camp (28-9)

Moses has exposed contradictions and revealed weaknesses in the colonial mindset. Ironically, he will continue to inspire anxiety about the threat posed by black men. Hence the cover-ups and distortions in the newspaper report. Try as it may, this society will never be able to purge itself of the black peril which *it* has imagined into reality. White settler society will continue to perpetuate the myth of black peril, reconstructing white women as forbidden objects of desire. Even in death, perhaps especially in death, the image of Moses will haunt white settler society.

In *The Grass is Singing* Lessing exposes cracks and contradictions in white settler society as she successfully prophesises the emergence of an angry African nationalism - symbolised by Moses. His Biblical name suggests that through his example, he will lead his people out of the 'slavery' (of white settler rule) and into the 'promised land' of the new Zimbabwe.³⁹ Hence there is a case for reading Moses as a proto-nationalist figure - one who has become impatient with white civilisation (symbolised by Mary), and who has therefore turned to violence as the most effective means of protest in his quest to shake off the yoke of colonial oppression. Somewhat problematically, the author allows

³⁸ Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), where the protagonist, Bigger, also murders a white woman (his boss's daughter), is a point of comparison. Whereas Wright represents the complex internal workings of Bigger's psyche, Lessing does not attempt the same with Moses.

³⁹ Mary's Biblical name, on the other hand, also fits her function in the novel. It suggests the classic dichotomy of Woman: i.e. is she a Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene (the whore)? In a sense, she vacillates between both identities, and suffers social opprobrium for both. As an over-aged 'Virgin Mary' she is ridiculed by Salisbury society. Yet as Mary Magdalene (or 'the whore'), a transgressive figure, who courts the affections of a black man, she finds herself an outcast.

Moses to function as a symbol without giving him a real voice of his own. In a sense, therefore, the text is complicit in his typecasting and depersonalisation.

In an interview with Eve Bertelsen, Lessing later reflected:

There was a long time when I thought that it was a pity I ever wrote Moses like that, because he was less of a person than a symbol. But it was the only way I could write him at that time, since I'd never met Africans excepting the servants or politically, in a certain complicated way. But now I've changed my mind again. I think it was the right way to write Moses, because if I'd made him too individual it would've unbalanced the book. I think I was right to make him a bit unknown (Bertelsen 1985: 102).

We will see that Marechera articulates the counterpoint.

1b. Marechera's "I Am the Rape"

Marechera's writing can be seen both as a complement to and a critique of Lessing's account, which crucially lacks a proper black male perspective. Whereas Lessing cannot and does not comment on "What does a black man want?", Marechera can and does.⁴⁰ The following poem can be read in answer to this question.

I Am the Rape

I am the rape
Marked on the map
The unpredictable savage
Set down on the page
The obsequious labourer
Who will never be emperor

My hips have rhythm
My lips an anthem
My arms a reckoning
My feet flight
My eyes black sunlight
My hair dreadlocks

Sit on this truth out at sea
Hit the shit when you go out to tea
Don't want to hear what ears hear
Don't want to see what eyes see
Your white body writhing underneath
All the centuries of my wayward fear

Goodness is not ground out of a stone
Evil neither. Men gnaw their chicken bones.
Know the electric shocks that seized my testicles.

⁴⁰ Conversely, Lessing's work offers clues to that which is noticeably missing in Marechera's work: i.e. white female thoughts and voices.

Which now you eat with the lips of a sunrise
Your white body writhing underneath
All the centuries of my wayward fear.⁴¹

(Marechera 1990: 125)

Marechera addresses the issue in characteristically provocative style. Instead of denying the stigma of black peril, the speaker of this poem relishes and embodies it, declaring “I am the Rape”. Marechera’s African persona writes back, in the first person, to centuries of stereotyping in the imperialist imagination, to master narratives which have constructed him as Other, as rape-prone, and as “The unpredictable savage”, and have set this “down on the page” in imperialist fictions. “The transference of white fantasy to black experience,” argues David Marriott, in his provocative recent study *On Black Men*, “continues to haunt the black imaginary” (2000: ix). “The black man is ... everything that the wishful – shameful fantasies of [dominant western] culture want him to be, an enigma of inversion and of hate – and this is our existence as men, as black men” (x). The persona in Marechera’s poem, written in the 1970s, seems to address precisely this predicament.

Ostensibly, it is addressed to the ‘rape victim’ with her “white body writhing underneath/All the centuries of my wayward fear”. Of course, the ‘rape’ also represents the revenge of a black man on an entire white civilisation. Yet the revenge is uncertain of itself. We would expect the taunting rapist to speak of her fear, not his own: i.e. “my wayward fear”. The unexpected wording declares it is underneath his fear, not in her own, that the ‘victim’ writhes. A poem ostensibly about rape and conquest of white woman and white civilisation therefore turns in on itself to become an introspective reflection on the “wayward fears” of the speaker, the ‘rapist’, himself. Also against expectations, the ‘rapist’ rather than the ‘victim’ is imaged as the traumatised victim of sexual abuse, through “electric shocks that seized my testicles”. It is suggested the torture has been administered, either physically or psychologically, by the white master.

⁴¹ There have obviously been editing problems in the transcription of this poem because it appears differently in *The Black Insider* (1990) and *Cemetery of Mind* (1992). I have stuck strictly to *The Black Insider* edition because it seems to make more sense. Therefore “hips” replaces “lips” in the first line of the second stanza. “Hit” replaces “Shit” in the second line of the third stanza, although I am not sure this is correct. I suspect the original version may have been “Hit on this truth out at sea/Shit the shit when you go out to tea.” Also “Don’t”, in the third stanza, appears with an apostrophe, as opposed to without in the *Cemetery of Mind* edition, and the fourth stanza is also different: “Men gnaw their chicken bones” has no full stop and is on a different line to “Evil neither.”

The speaker therefore casts himself as both rapist and victim in this poem, as he calls into question his stigmatised status as a black man.

It is questionable as to whether this is 'rape' in the white male colonial imagination or rape because it involves a lack of consent. In fact it is suggested the woman consents to the 'rape', that possibly she writhes beneath his "wayward fear" in orgasmic pleasure, rather than excruciating pain. She also seems to participate freely when she "eat[s]" his wounded testicles "with the lips of a sunrise". The image is warm and healing. It is doubtful whether this is an actual rape scene at all. In other words, the 'rape' may be occurring entirely in the speaker's mind, as he makes love to the white woman (either in fantasy or reality), but reflects introspectively on the nature of his desire, and to what extent his sexual impulses have been overdetermined by the colonial context. Nevertheless, in representing the 'rape' as the woman's pleasure, Marechera opens himself up to charges of misogyny: why does the poet assume, albeit in his imagination, that violent abuse and orgasmic pleasure can be mistaken for one another?

The significant point here, however, is that Marechera follows Frantz Fanon "[i]n shifting the focus of cultural racism from the politics of nationalism to the politics of narcissism" (Bhabha 1986: xxiv). Marechera, like Fanon, turns the analysis of race and sexuality inwards and in so doing, he confronts the condition of the "depersonalised, dislocated colonial subject" always "overdetermined from without" (Bhabha 1986: xxii-xxiv). Significantly, with his first person speaker, Marechera simultaneously inhabits and deconstructs the racially determined identity imposed on him from the outside. He thereby "causes a subversive slippage of identity and authority", in Bhabha's words (1986: xxiv). Although he inhabits the externally imposed stigma and the racist imago of the 'black rapist' he nevertheless asserts control over it, transforming it, as he proudly, but ironically, proclaims "I am the rape".

In this poem, the 'rape' is not allowed merely to symbolise the redressing of an historic wrong. Marechera satirises the idea that the 'rape' of this white woman is for conquest and retribution. It acknowledges this, yet turns away from cultural racism and nationalist politics to represent instead the personalised experience of a black man engaged in sex, either in fantasy or reality, with a white woman in a racist society. Marechera's treatment of desire and sexual intimacy across the colour bar in this instance problematises concepts and constructions of black male identity in not only the

master narrative of imperialism but in nationalism, liberalism and other dominating narratives as well. As this poem indicates, Marechera has no simple answer to “What does the black man want?” but he wishes to focus on an individual’s experience and is prepared to contemplate multiple motivations and many contradictions. In tracing the trope of interracial desire, sex, love, relationships and marriage in Marechera’s work, I will highlight and discuss some of these.

Marechera’s narratives, which transgress sexual prohibition on the most immediate level of their content, also throw up disturbing and excessive elements that run beyond the brief of a straightforward critique. This for me makes Marechera the most challenging, yet also the most significant writer, on this topic in Zimbabwean literature.

1c. *The House of Hunger*

The House of Hunger collection as a whole is highly significant because it is the first book to bring sex, graphically, to the foreground of black Zimbabwean literature and it shows Marechera working through a series of questions regarding interracial sexuality. Whereas Lessing merely suggests sex across the colour bar, Marechera actually depicts shocking images of it in his text, as though in an attempt, partly, to permanently unsettle the idea of a gulf between black and white in the Rhodesian society in which it is set. The images cannot be dismissed as simply pornographic or sensationalist in their iconoclasm because they are more than that. Marechera is concerned not just with disturbing the distinctions between black and white in a racialised society but in considering the psychic origins and effects of these - manifested in sexual behaviour.

House of Hunger, the title-piece, is an autobiographicalised account of the narrator/author's flight from the depraved conditions he suffers under Ian Smith's Rhodesian regime. White privilege and racial segregation are the background to this non-sequential narrative, which recalls the narrator's township childhood, his missionary school education, having a white girlfriend at the University of Rhodesia, participating in political demonstrations and fleeing into exile. "I got my things and left" (Marechera 1978: 1) is the opening line of a novel which, in many respects, is written back to front. In terms of content as well, this is not a straightforward anti-colonial narrative. Although Marechera expresses instances of anti-Smith resistance, he also exposes disunity and contradiction, ahead of his time, within the nationalist struggle.

Sexuality is a lens through which the author views a troubled society and national psyche. Sex across the colour bar can be seen as a form of protest in this story. On the surface interracial sex and miscegenation highlight hypocrisy and double standards in a racially segregated society, and make a mockery of the doctrine of racial separation. Transgression does not necessarily equate with emancipation, however, although it is presented as such, in one instance, in Doug's film, which features a multiracial orgy. Doug, an art student at the university, is a white liberal. His montage of everyday life, politics and interracial sex is presented to an anti-establishment student gathering as an avant-garde protest piece with politically-liberating potential. But, as we will see,

tensions are evident in the montage which problematise the idea that interracial sex necessarily overturns the oppressive colour bar.

The film ends with a series of question marks as if questioning itself (and Marechera's narrative similarly 'ends' with much unresolved and no closure). Despite the erosion of the colour bar, are some characters 'liberated' at the expense of others? Why is the liberation of a black man presented as the symbolic 'attainment' of a white woman? Can a black woman feel liberated while having sex with a white man? The first person narrator, a fictionalised version of Marechera himself, directly addresses these questions, but with heavy irony and seemingly deliberate ambiguity.

In the novella, at least one character wants to possess a white woman as a trophy - Harry, the spy, who brags about his "white chick" in much the same way as he proudly displays expensive clothes and accessories. Harry's attitude towards women is symptomatic of his attitude towards politics - which has earned him a dubious reputation. He has sold-out on those in the liberation movement and works for the Rhodesian Special Branch in return for a high salary and the much-coveted material goods he associates with the white man.

For Harry, a white woman represents the ultimate possession in the material goods game. He says, "My white chick is full of sugar. She is a full-bodied wine with a touch of divinity, that's what she is, my chick" (Marechera 1978: 12). He has bought into the oppressive concept of white superiority, which is one of the reasons he is so despised in the community. Thus, he values her as something more than sexual, and says "She's got everything nigger girls don't have... Nigger girls are just meat... And I don't like my meat raw... Of course it's another thing when a man is starving for pussy..." (13). In other words, he regards black women as unrefined sex objects - certainly not on a par with white women. Harry is the epitome of Fanon's "black man who wants to be white" (Fanon 1967: 11), who has "an inferiority complex" (13) and who, for this reason "wants to go to bed with a white woman" (16). Sadly, he can never achieve his quest for validation from the white man - despite selling his soul to the white Rhodesian cause - because tacitly he accepts his inferior status and therefore perpetuates his subordination.

Also, by lusting after white women, he represents a form of black peril.⁴²

Harry's attitude towards his white girlfriend typifies one common response of black men towards white women. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes:

Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*.

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as white.

Now - and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged - who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me who proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man (Fanon 1967: 63).

Fanon goes on to quote Jean Veneuse, who talks of the "satisfaction of being the master of a European woman" (Fanon 1967: 50). It is this satisfaction that Harry seeks and feels, but which Marechera identifies as problematic.

We see the narrator wrestling to disentangle himself from popular perceptions of black men and white women, using irony and satire to set his own views on the subject of interracial relationships apart from Harry's. Nevertheless, Marechera makes them difficult to pinpoint. The narrator's position on his own love and sex across the colour bar is far from clear. Some clues are evident in his interactions with other characters in the beer-hall. Curious about his relationship with a white woman, Julia asks: "Do you think white girls are any better in bed? That Patricia for instance" (Marechera 1978: 46). She refers to his white girlfriend at the University,⁴³ and is asking the narrator to compare black and white women. His enigmatic answer suggests something unpleasant and pernicious: "The weather was rather humid. Sort of sticky and stuffy, you couldn't keep it in without slipping and falling to the rocks below" (46). He likens the white woman's body to a foreign landscape and a dangerously unfamiliar climate. Presumably "it" means his penis. This description of sexual penetration shocks even the candid Julia, who asks for further explanation, but he remains mysterious. "The rocks" seem to

⁴² Perhaps, however, the white Rhodesians he sells secrets to are willing to accept his taking of a white woman as a necessary sacrifice. In this case, he hasn't so much 'stolen' a white woman as 'bought' one - with their consent. In any event, since Harry works so closely with the Rhodesians, his black peril is not equated with the peril of black nationalism.

⁴³ Julia herself has just remarked on how impressed she was by Citre, a white student she made a film with, who "screwed very well, as though he was drawing circles with his loins" (46).

represent possible annihilation and death. This is of course a misogynist description of Patricia and her body. However, “the weather” is a changeable metaphor, which suggests his sexual encounters with white women are not always the same.

This section of the story is the recollection of an alcohol-induced conversation some years previously. The present narrator is reflecting on a past attempt to mix macho bravado and disaffected nonchalance and he does so in a bemused, self-ironising manner. The comments are deliberately crude, provocative and calculated to impress, but the macho attitude falls flat and fails to convince. It becomes clear the narrator has been covering up a softer more ‘feminine’ side to himself when Julia, contemptuous of his macho self-image, asks him about the poetry he wrote to Patricia. She of course knows that in this society it is not considered manly to display feelings of love and affection for a woman because this is seen as weakness: it demonstrates vulnerability. She then asks, “How did you reconcile your politics with your sexual adventures?” (47). It is a loaded question. What politics? The narrator has so far fiercely resisted the Smith government with its policy of white privilege. It seems that Julia is asking the narrator why black women are not good enough for him. She sees a contradiction between his politics and his sex life, not because he has had sex with a white woman, but because she suspects he has developed an intimate relationship with her. In any event, she would like to know what is so special about white women? His response is to belittle Patricia as anything but prized property. For instance, he jokes about her reputation for ugliness amongst other black men. Harry, for example, “said she looked like the back of a bus and he wanted to know how on earth I mounted it” (47). With this offending remark, Julia spits at the narrator in disgust, but we are not sure exactly why. Is she insulted by his general denigration of women or his preference for white girls over black girls in spite of what they may look like?

A self-conscious narrator now finds himself on the defensive, trying to reconcile personal experience with the expectations of society, and having to negotiate a minefield of hostilities as well as a barrage of questions: How does society see his relationship? How does he see it? How does he justify it to the community? Does he need to justify it? In the midst of all these personal identity negotiations, he tries to hide behind a macho mask that keeps slipping. This may explain his nasty comments about Patricia.

Later, we return to his relationship with Patricia with the episode of Doug's film show. Although, as I have stated, the montage transgresses the colour bar to a great extent, it also inadvertently re-enforces the existing racial binaries and stereotypes. The event is recollected in an ironic, critical tone by a narrator who is now somewhat detached. In the montage, the narrator is shown "in the throes of a rather violent intercourse" (68) with Patricia, while Julia is being "screwed very well"(46), in her own words, by Citre. This episode is interposed by a strip of Smith declaring UDI, and the sexual transgression is mobilised to deliver the political message of "Screw Ian Smith; screw the Colour Bar". The statement is perhaps not as progressive in terms of race-gender politics as it believes itself to be. Watching it again, the narrator describes his intercourse on film with Patricia as "rather violent" (68). In fact, he appears somewhat taken aback by the violence of the representation: Patricia is shown as the victim and conquest of a black man in a contentious political statement. He almost expresses surprise that the black man on film could be himself: the image does not match the reality. He has become an imago in the imperialist and nationalist imagination, which wants to see him as rape-prone or conquering. The film clip shows no intimacy, only domination; and the ironic, politically ambivalent narrator seems bemused with the idea of himself symbolising the onslaught of black nationalism. In the context of Doug's montage, however, the images of interracial sex are deployed as an ominous warning to Ian Smith and his followers of things to come.

The narrator's sex with Patricia in this instance invites us to focus on issues of violence and conquest. This one episode is a partial and somewhat inaccurate representation of the narrator's relationship with Patricia. Nevertheless, her silence and passivity are unsettling. The physically-disabled Patricia is mute throughout the entire narrative so it is difficult to gauge her own viewpoint. She is most often cast as a victim of hapless circumstances. Yet Marechera does not allow her to function simply on the symbolic level (which Lessing tends to do with Moses). Along with Julia and other characters, we question the motivation of the narrator's involvement with her. Is he genuinely attracted to Patricia as a person or does he simply want to show her off in public as a 'conquest'? The fact that he writes intimate poetry to her suggests the opposite. Moreover, he seems troubled that the attachment means something completely different to wider society than it does to himself.

The affair is controversial because, as he says, “she and I had dared to flaunt our horns and hooves to our respective racial groups” (73). They are beaten up by a group of white students demonstrating against integration in university residence halls. Both are attacked viciously and Patricia’s shirt is “ripped to reveal a dirty bra” (73) - symbolic perhaps of a soiled sexuality because, in the assailants view, she has ‘fallen from grace’. The disabled Patricia is thereby punished for her liaison with a black man, made an example of for supposedly encouraging other black men to pursue white women. Simultaneously the narrator is punished for black peril. By the time he recollects this story, the ill-fated relationship has ended largely due to antagonistic forces in a hostile society. The unhappy but self-reliant Patricia, who is an outcast in Rhodesian society, moves to Cape Town then disappears somewhere in southern Africa, while the narrator finds refuge in England. Like Moses in *The Grass is Singing*, Patricia is somewhat of a silent enigma. Unlike Moses, however, she is not frozen into symbolism. What she represents is ambiguous. With Marechera, the trope of interracial sex ridicules racism yet also resists simple accommodation into the predominant genre of protest literature.

Lewis Nkosi’s, *Mating Birds* (1987), a more sombre narrative also about an interracial relationship, but set ten years later in apartheid South Africa, is a point of contrast. Nkosi’s narrator, condemned to die because a racist society and the white woman he loves have accused him of rape, rails against the system at the end of the novel:

...I’ll die a vaster, deeper, more cruel conspiracy by the rulers of my country who have made a certain knowledge between persons of different races not only impossible to achieve but positively dangerous even to attempt to acquire. They have made contact between the races a cause for profoundest alarm amongst white citizens (1987: 180).

Although his representation of the interracial relationship is also ambiguous to a certain extent (we are never exactly certain about what happened), Nkosi nevertheless makes an earnest political point. Marechera, in his heavily ironic style, resists closure on the issue and refuses to do the same.

Adding to the self-questioning quality of Marechera’s texts is the intermixing of autobiography with fiction. In the following short stories, also contained in *The House of Hunger* collection, the narrators are close, but not identical, to the author himself.

This gives the texts added irony as they consider questions of personal identity which – with Marechera – invariably return to unconscious interracial desires, drives and transgressions. But the author’s treatment of the trope is ambivalent: moreover, a text, transgressive at the level of interracial sex, is not always obviously political, and it may even be retrograde – as we will see from the following examples.

Thought-tracks in the Snow: fighting over a white woman

Thought-tracks in the Snow is set in England in the 1970s. In this short story, an ironic narrator again reflects on a fraught interracial relationship. The narrator, Charles, a university lecturer, is giving extra lessons to a “pimpily youth” from Nigeria who wants to know what he thinks “about the Rhodesian crisis and about white girls” (Marechera 1978: 142).⁴⁴ Race, sex and politics are intertwined from the start.

When it emerges that the Nigerian student is having an affair with Charles’s white wife, Rachel, the two men have a fight at her behest. The ambivalent narrator would sooner not take part at all. He is at first reluctant to put up a fight for Rachel, whom he has lost interest in anyway (besides, they are getting divorced) but he relents when faced with a violent challenge and no other option. When the Nigerian student calls Rachel a “Fucking white bitch!” (147), she appeals to his sense of duty: “Charles, don’t just sit there - he’s hurting me - your wife!” (147). The Nigerian student ridicules Charles, saying: “Fucking Rhodesians - get independence first, then perhaps you’ll learn to fight!” (147). Not having independence is regarded as lacking a masculine identity; and the struggle for national independence, it is suggested, is on a par with the struggle for a white woman. In the end, Rachel becomes his Charles’s ‘conquest’ once again, but this happens more by default than intention.

Black Skin What Mask

In this short story, a thoughtful narrator psychoanalytically considers issues of black male identity as he recounts possible reasons why his friend, self-loathing and uncomfortable with his blackness, “finally slashed his wrists” and “is now in a lunatic

⁴⁴ Charles was Marechera’s first name at school and university, before he changed it back to Dambudzo, his childhood name.

asylum” (Marechera 1978: 93). The story moves from intense inward reflection to dialogue between the two men, then back to self-reflection. The setting is Oxford University in the 1970s and the story is obviously an ironic comment on Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. With “What Mask” Marechera posits half a question/half a remark, suggesting complete transparency of the mask in this case, and a breakdown in the process of identity formation.

The narrator begins by highlighting the gap between his own sense of selfhood and the image he is required to inhabit as a black man in a white-dominated society:

My skin sticks out a mile in all the crowds around here. Every time I go out I feel it tensing up, hardening, torturing itself. It only relaxes when I am in shadow, when I am alone, when I wake up early in the morning, when I am doing mechanical actions, and, strangely enough, when I am angry. But it is coy and self-conscious when I draw in my chair and begin to write.

It is like a silent friend: moody, assertive, possessive, callous - sometimes (93).

The passage recalls Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness” in *Black Skin White Masks* where he writes, “The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands...I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me” (1967: 140). The experience of objectification, as Fanon demonstrates, creates a ‘double vision’ within the black male subject - a gap between image and identity.

In this story, Marechera demonstrates the “crucial engagement between mask and identity, image and identification,” which Bhabha perceives in Fanon, and “from which comes the lasting tension of our freedom and the lasting impression of ourselves as others” (Bhabha 1986: xxv). Sadly the narrator’s friend gets caught in the middle of this process and fails, in the end, in the quest for personal freedom. The nameless friend is a fellow black Rhodesian, suffering an inferiority complex because of his race, as well as a crisis in masculine identity. The narrator explains:

...there had to be another side to it - sex.

The Black girls in Oxford - whether African, West Indian or American - despised those of us who came from Rhodesia. After all, we still haven’t won

our independence. ...It was all quite unflattering. We had become - indeed we are - the Jews of Africa, and nobody wanted us...(Marechera 1978: 97).

The narrator is ambivalent: "I didn't care one way or the other. Booze was better than girls, even black girls. And dope was heaven. But he worried" (97).

Seemingly desperate for female validation of his masculinity, the friend "got himself worked up about a West Indian girl who worked in the kitchen," (97-8) who apparently rejected him, possibly, he guesses, because he is African (and a black Rhodesian at that). Finally he remarks: "Maybe black men are not good enough for them [black girls]... Maybe all they do is dream all day long of being screwed nuts by white chaps" (98). The friend is suffering anxiety, sexual jealousy, and feelings of emasculation. Putting a brave face on it, he says: "From now on, its white girls or nothing," but the narrator reminds him that he has tried that already and suggests: "Why don't you try men? ... or simply masturbate. We all do." (98). The friend is outraged. I will further discuss homophobia (or repressed homosexuality) in this scene in Chapter Three.

In *Black Skin What Mask*, the black women are represented as equating masculine prowess with victory in nationalist struggle. Uninterested in black Rhodesian men, they view them as still being enslaved to their white Rhodesian masters and therefore not 'real' men. (At least this is the perception of the two men as they commiserate with each other, drinking bottles of claret until the early hours of the morning.) In this story, Marechera is beginning to explore the shaping of masculinity by African nationalism, and vice versa. Such pressures merely add to the friend's inability to negotiate an identity. The friend is a victim of racist society, as well as of reductive concepts of masculinity, which exacerbate his low self-esteem. Sadly it is all too much for him. In the friend's case, on the issue of "What does a black man want?" the narrator/analyst's answer is the verification of his manhood and masculine identity. Fanon asks, "who but a white woman can do this for me?" (1967: 63) and in fact the friend, who craves whiteness - "it was painful to watch him trying to scrub the blackness out of his skin" (93) - seems to agree when he declares "its white girls or nothing [*sic*]" (98), but the narrator reminds him - and himself - that this is self-deluding fantasy.

Scandalous disclosures: What does a white man want (with/from a black woman)?

Fanon asks “when a white man hates black men, is he not yielding to a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority? Since his ideal is an infinite virility, is there not a phenomenon of diminution in relation to the Negro, who is viewed as a penis symbol?” (1967: 159). With the trope of interracial sex, Marechera briefly explores the question: What does a white man want? (i.e. with a black woman). None of the white male characters actually comment on this themselves. However, Nestar - the notorious prostitute in *House of Hunger* - has some interesting answers, derived from a wealth of experience. Through Nestar, the author discloses the scandalous secrets of a repressive society. In discussion with the narrator, she confides that “White men have a thing about black women you know” (Marechera 1978: 51). Declaring that “there was nothing I wouldn’t do,” she relates a series of stories about her clients. Although the sexual episodes that follow can be read in a number of ways, they all offer important access to a troubled national psyche, showing the effects of a racialised society in sexual behaviour.

“Most wouldn’t even touch me,” Nestar says of her white clients, “They’d just make me do things and they’d watch with their eyeballs sticking out. And masturbate like hell” (51). In return for money, Nestar allows herself to be fetishised as an exotic sex object by men who clearly have a fascination for the black female body. Most of her white male customers simply want to gaze at her performing auto-erotic acts, perhaps to indulge their fantasies of black women as sex creatures. The eccentric clients are more interesting. Nestar states:

But there was one who always had the same old thing. I would suck his balls and he would come off into my hair. He would really grease my hair with the stuff. Rubbing it in like a bishop laying on hands, while I licked the rest of the drops from his stick. Then he would make me stick my arse right out into the sky of his face with my head between my knees and he would breathe it in like god accepting incense and then the baptism would come when he’d sort of writhe and cry for me to fart and urinate into his face. Like rain. A sort of storm scene. And then there was Billy... (51).

The bizarre religious ritual performed by 'the bishop' shows a troubled man in the grip of forbidden desire. Sexual gratification is followed by intense feelings of guilt and a need to seek salvation. In other words, 'the bishop' has a sin fetish. But why does he pay a black woman to partake in it? This is perhaps considered more deviant and sinful because of the racial transgression and therefore, possibly, more erotic and irresistible. We wonder if he would perform the same sex act (or ritual - as it seems) with a white woman. It is hard to imagine him 'sully' a white woman in the same manner. The eccentric behaviour seems a reaction, in large part, to the social and moral laws of a racialised society.

In the first part of the ritual, where Nestar performs fellatio and then drinks 'the bishop's' semen, he enacts the dominant role while she takes on a subservient one. This 'taking of the body and blood of Christ' is followed by the "laying on hands," where she becomes the sinner accepting communion from him and he becomes 'the bishop' granting absolution. Rubbing white semen into her hair might be symbolic of cleansing. Later, however, when guilt sets in the bishop feels obliged to reverse the roles, so he places Nestar above him to accept a 'baptism' of farts and urine from her. In this rather complex role-play, 'the bishop' now becomes the sinner who must suffer degradation as a form of penitence: it is he who must now seek absolution from her. With the storm of urine and farts, in his fantasy, he is cleansed. Ironically they are both soiled and not, in literal terms, cleansed by the ritual. A specialist in subversion and sacrilege, it is typical of Marechera to mix the sacred with the profane in this manner - to reduce high-minded piety to farting, urinating and copulating. The grotesque, a feature of so much of his writing, subverts moral discourse and a pious yet hypocritical official culture.

Nestar's next story is that of Billy, another regular white client, and it illustrates the 'nanny fetish'.

Billy knew all there was to know about orgasms. He'd simply explode into a long hysterical one just at the sight of my body. And he couldn't stick it in enough. He'd sort of crumble up like a biscuit and cry as though he just couldn't believe it. And he always called me Mother. He'd just tense up. And slowly break up like a little dry twig of god's still, small voice. And swearing with glee like a schoolboy. He liked to fuck me to the sound of Shostakovitch's Leningrad Symphony (52).

This account has interestingly crude Freudian overtones. Billy (whom the narrator discovers is actually William Petyt, a well-known artist) obviously strives for some sort of oneness with a mother figure - in this case Nestar. Even though she is black, he still calls her Mother. This theme is echoed in Doug's film montage where: "The second film was a ruthless close-up shot of - five minutes long - of a black woman nestling and hushing a white baby to sleep. The baby's satiated pink moonface puffed in and out slowly and its small blue eyes sleepily contemplated a single long hair on the black woman's chin" (68). In southern Africa, white mothers have often employed black women as nannies to look after their children. These women are more than baby-sitters: they dress, feed, change napkins, and play with the children as if they were their own. Therefore many white children have grown up with strong attachments to their surrogate black mothers. Beyond a certain age, racialised society intervenes to break the bond and declare this sort of intimacy taboo: and any lingering feelings of attachment are brutally repressed. In Nestar, Billy has found an outlet for his repression. He behaves somewhat like a child during sex, perhaps because he yearns for the close Oedipal bond of his early years with a black woman, and perhaps because he never got this from his biological mother. We can only speculate about his upbringing, and also about the significance of Shostakovitch's Leningrad Symphony.

Colonial war and a fetish for 'Woman as a dark continent' are what another white client is interested in. Citing this example, Nestar says:

[Billy's] friend Mike was weird... He made me stand naked and astride a sort of bull's-eye thing and he would throw all kinds of jellies right at my hole, you know. And while aiming and all he would chant a thing about the Congo, the Mau Mau, Algeria, and one of our leaders who shall remain nameless (52).

Again we witness a white man's fascination with black women's bodies, which since the nineteenth century have been viewed with much curiosity. Hélène Cixous states that for Woman (both black and white, we assume):

the 'dark continent' trick has been pulled on her...One can teach her, as soon as she is taught her name, that hers is the dark region: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous...Their bodies, which they

haven't dared enjoy, have been colonised.... Because [men] need femininity to be associated with death[,] they get a hard-on when you scare their pants off! For their own sake they need to be afraid of us (1989: 565-566).

For the white male settler in Africa, the black woman's body possibly functions even more than the white woman's as a metaphor for the dangerous and unknown "dark continent." It is symbolic of the landscape on which colonial and nationalist battles have been fought.⁴⁵ For Mike, Nestar's body represents the jungles and rain-forests of the Congo, the mountains and plains of Kenya, and the deserts and dunes of Algeria, where famous battles have been fought between the colonisers and the colonised. Mike re-enacts these battle scenes possibly because he needs to be afraid in order to be aroused, and possibly because the fantasy involves veneration from white settler culture if he is able to achieve dominance on 'the dark continent'. Since Nestar does not mention penetration, one might guess the warfare game, throwing jellies, etc., substitutes for this. It is possible that Mike suffers from impotence and struggles in this ritual to achieve a sense of masculine identity that he lacks. However, the struggle to demonstrate virile white male domination is shown to be absurd, and even pathetic: Nestar (acting as the dark continent) still stands above and astride Mike, undaunted by the jelly missiles. This parallels the fact that all the famous battles he wants to re-enact were won by Africans: i.e. 'the dark continent', not white settlers. Set in the dying days of white settler rule in Rhodesia, the scene predicts yet another defeat. Significantly, Nestar is never completely subordinated by any of her white clients. Nor, in her description of these sex-acts, is she humiliated. If this is a white male fantasy, then it is never achieved.

Julia, also a prostitute, is the other significant character in *House of Hunger* who engages in interracial sex. Her encounter with Citre is described as casual and for the main purpose of mutual pleasure. Nevertheless, it is caught on camera for the anti-Ian Smith montage, and therefore used to make a political point. In a remarkably candid style, and through 'low-life' characters such as prostitutes, especially Nestar, Marechera discloses the scandalous secrets of a repressive society.

⁴⁵ See also Anne McClintock, who discerns, in H Rider Haggard and other imperialist writers, a mapping of Woman onto the land: fantasies of conquest exist in tension, she claims, with fears of engulfment or emasculation. She argues imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of gender power (1995: 17, 22).

What does a black woman want (with/from a white man)?

This is not a focus question for Marechera but we can nevertheless speculate regarding the two major black women in *House of Hunger*, Nestar and Julia, who comment on their relationships with white men. In his study of “The Woman of Colour and the White Man” (which was conducted in the Antilles) Fanon states, “they will dream of ‘a wonderful night, a wonderful lover, a white man.’ Possibly, too, they will become aware that ‘white men do not marry black women.’ But they have consented to run this risk; what they must have is whiteness at any price” (1967: 49). This theory is relevant, though problematic, in consideration of Nestar and Julia.

Nestar’s own life-story is a sad tale. “She got pregnant, was cast out of school and home and church and is now one of the more famous whores in the whole country” (Marechera 1978: 49). Her story starts when “The married man who had made her pregnant beat her up when she went to him for help. She was twelve then.” (50-51). She gave birth to Leslie, a son of mixed race, in the bush.⁴⁶ The married man absolves himself of all responsibility and she suffers the opprobrium of being an outcast in society. Nevertheless, as a professional prostitute, she refuses to see herself as a victim, even when selling sex to white men. In fact, she literally capitalises on her outcast status in society.

Neither Nestar nor Julia neatly fit Fanon’s theory of wanting “whiteness at any price”. In fact, both appear to have developed a somewhat mercenary attitude towards white men. It seems that Julia simply wants good sex from a white man, is quite pleased with what she gets from Citre, and remarks only on that - almost as though it is she who has used him as a sex object, certainly not the other way around. With both women, there is no specific desire for the validation from white men. With Nestar there is no Cinderella fantasy, no dream of a white man ‘rescuing’ her from poverty. In her relations with white men, it seems Nestar wants money, plainly and simply, because she needs to make a living. Both she and Julia share unsentimental, unromantic, practicable attitudes towards white men – all men, actually. In fact the experience of these characters calls Fanon’s theory into question. In her critique of Fanon, Diana Fuss states:

⁴⁶ The racial identity of the father is unspecified. He could be black, white or mixed race. So too is Nestar’s racial identity, although we know she is either mixed race or black.

...the colonial encounter is staged within exclusively masculine parameters; the colonial other remains an undifferentiated, homogenised male, and subjectivity is ultimately claimed for men alone. When the politics of sexual difference is in question, Fanon's theory of identification risks presenting itself as simply another "theory of the 'subject' [that] has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'" (Irigaray) (Fuss 1999: 317).

Fuss highlights a masculinist bias in Fanon's theorising, to which the experiences of Nestor and Julia, to some extent, move in a contrast.

The House of Hunger, as a collection, intervenes dramatically on the landscape of Zimbabwean literature. An important reason, rarely discussed, is that it initiates uncensored representation, analysis and discussion of sex and sexual behaviour as a route to understanding the troubled national unconscious. A quarter of a century after its publication, this is still a relevant record in post-independence Zimbabwe. However, Marechera's treatment of the trope of interracial sex shifts more deeply inwards in later narratives as it considers the problem of identity in the wake of a lingering internalised racism. Increasingly, as I will demonstrate, Marechera's subsequent work imagines an identity outside the deterministic framework of the colonial context and gestures towards a non-racist future - yet remains self-consciously caught in old structures, with which it is clearly frustrated.

2. Personal Identity and the Interracial Sex Trope in *The Black Insider*

In *The Black Insider* (written before *Black Sunlight* but published posthumously) the narrator, who is twenty-five, has a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old white girl, Helen. He is living amongst a community of other artists, intellectuals and activists in a London squat while an apocalyptic war rages outside. Not published till 1990, the book was written in the late 1970s, in the wake of London's worst ever race riots. It takes the form of a modern-day Boccaccio's *Decameron*, charged with contemporary issues - some of which are race and sexuality. Helen - who suffers from an unsayable hereditary disease - meets the narrator because she comes to work for an unspecified organisation, which has its headquarters at the squat where he lives. She makes posters for this group, and meets the narrator in a fated encounter, amidst all the chaos and turmoil of the war.

Focusing on two individuals, the narrator and Helen, *The Black Insider* comments on the racially-imbued character of their sexual relationship. Helen's entry is described in Freudian terms: When she knocks at his door, he says:

I released the three locks and the seven chains to find a freckled oval face with green eyes chewing on a Freudian bubblegum suddenly smile inquisitively up at me. My hairs stood on end just to watch the mouth-wet serious intimacy of her little chin. I stood aside and followed behind her. Her small neat untidiness of body was a blow below the belt. But I hastily caught up with my own liberated ideas and proceeded to treat her as anything other than a sex object. It was all rather trying (1990: 26).

The narrator's libidinal drives are unlocked by Helen's entry. A fictionalised version of Marechera, the black insider is an author himself who appears to be aware that he is indulging his fantasies in the construction of this narrative. When Helen asks him what he is writing, he wants to say: "This book in which you and I are. But that would have sounded too clever and too contrived for a real book..." (26). Whether the author is describing a real event or a fantasy is not entirely clear. As in the rest of the book, the reader can choose to read Helen as part fantasy - part reality. Pattison, in an intriguing psychoanalytic reading, proposes that Helen and other characters in the novel are also actually versions of Marechera himself. Problematically, however, he assumes the

author and narrator to be one and the same. Although the black insider is referred to as Mr Marechera at one point, one needs to note the genre is *not* strictly autobiography but a crafted fusion of this with fiction.

Pattison hypothesises:

Helen, who is “paler than the whitest ghost” [p.39] is clearly symbolic and represents the writer’s awareness of his own mental colonization ... The use of male and female characters as versions of the writer is not surprising. The id in its primitive form, prior to the influence of the ego, is asexual, thus in the elemental writing of Marechera the unconscious takes either male or female form. The writer can be either or both, the creation has a biological determination but is gender free. So it is that Helen ...symbolizes the white colonial experience in the Marecheran psyche (2001: 136).

Viewing Helen more as a manifestation of Marechera’s complex psychopathology than a crafted fictional creation, he sees her appearance as symptomatic of the author’s mental predicament: Marechera “could not act against the forces of colonialism and neocolonialism until his mental colonization had been expunged” (137):

In thrall to such forces the writer, as writer, is impotent. Appropriately then, the shells that destroy the Arts Faculty and kill Otilith and the others, thereby removing both the education system and the results of that system in Marechera, also kill Helen, at one and the same time destroying the colonial experience. Thus the narrator attains a sort of freedom and a sort of psychic unity and moves closer in his search for the primordial I (137).

In fact Marechera’s writing project deliberately problematises this concept - the quest for the “primordial I”, the pursuit of a sort of psychic unity. I read *The Black Insider* instead as the expression – and acceptance - of *psychic disunity*, the fractured nature of personal identity, with a particular focus on black male identity, displaced and under siege in a white-dominated society. The black insider’s project is to reassert individual agency over hostile, racist, forces that have tried to shape and construct him. In this sense, I agree with Pattison. But he the narrator is not so naïve enough to think he can simply erase these – and neither is the author, Marechera.

While the relationship with the young white girl does in some way represent a relationship with white civilisation, Helen is by no means a static and exclusive symbol of the colonial experience. She could be a version of the narrator/author's self but this is also an argument for the inherently changeable nature of identity or fundamental psychic incohesion. Pattison implies an interesting trans-gendered schism at the root of Marechera's identification process, but in doing so confines the voice of identity to a unique psychopathology.

The black insider's desire for Helen is reciprocated, yet dangerous and unpredictable – a sort of 'fatal attraction':

Her lips were sunlight in a glass of cold water, and they made all the raging inside a little softer... It seemed there could be nothing left of all the massive ache inside me. I had not, out of wonder, closed my eyes which were locked in deep hypnosis of her clear large eyes. Something inside them made me glance sideways and I saw the long sharp glint of something in her about to strike. I don't know what it was that burst out of me: but there she was, spinning backwards to hit her head against the bookshelf and she lay still on her back, the knife fallen out of her pink palm and I was rubbing my knuckles ruefully looking down at the blood seeping from the corner of her wide small-toothed mouth. I put the knife in my pocket. What kind of poster were they making downstairs anyway? She probably belonged to some party out there whose programme included black people like me. Suddenly I didn't want to know - that was why I was living like this - because I didn't want to know anything about it. (Marechera 1990: 28)

It is curious that the Insider sees "the long sharp glint of something *in* her about to strike." It is not something *on* her person, i.e. external, but something *in* her. This suggests that the murder weapon is inside Helen; in fact it suggests - in Lacanian terms - that she not only holds the phallus (the knife) but is the phallus. Helen has tried to kill the Insider for reasons not immediately known to him or herself. When she comes to, he shows her the intended murder weapon and she reacts with horror: "The blood surged up her throat into her face and she shut her eyes tightly as though the devil would depart if denied absolutely"(28). In her defense, Helen says: "You frightened me.

I mean I was suddenly appalled at myself. You see, I've never done that [kissed] with a black man before" (29). Black peril re-emerges as a theme: the motivation for Helen's attempted murder appears irrational - even to herself - and yet unstoppable. It is a sudden gut reaction against the physical attraction to a black man; she momentarily sees the black insider as enemy incarnate. The narrator speculates that she has derived this deep-seated unconscious racism from her associations with the poster-making organisation, although it is not clear what their programme is.

This relationship is also transgressive because of the age gap. Helen is only fourteen - two years below the age of consent. In legal terms, the narrator could be prosecuted for statutory rape, and this is a point, perhaps, the narrator wishes to emphasise. However, this clearly is not the nature of the relationship. In fact, Helen initiates the first encounter and the subsequent sexual relationship. She asks, as a formality, if she can move in with the narrator, but she has already moved her belongings into his room along with blankets and food. As the insider says, "She was so young - at the same time so old!" (49). Helen is no victim: she is a mature girl, with assertive rather than submissive qualities - not the innocent prey (as society may interpret this) of a dangerous black man. In fact, if anything, it is the insider rather than Helen who is seduced. It seems that she arranges the first sexual encounter when she finds him engaged in conversation with Liz, the English Literature lecturer, and tells him not to be long because "I'll be waiting in there alone for you" (50).⁴⁷

There is an inversion of stereotypical gender roles in this relationship which continues as a theme throughout the text. It is Helen, the woman, who is the expert in weaponry and warfare. She later teaches the Black Insider "the parts and uses of the guns" (107) with a view to defending themselves in the final onslaught in the apocalyptic war. Ironically it is she who is killed after taking a shell aimed at them both in a mortar attack at the end of the novel. She knows more about using knives and guns than the narrator. If Helen is symbolic of pernicious white influences (as Pattison implies) then the symbolism is contradictory: whereas she tries to kill him with a knife at the beginning of the novel, she tries to save him at the end by teaching him the parts and functions of guns, then shielding him from death.

⁴⁷ The reader knows, however, because the self-reflexive narrator/author insider has signalled it, that it is he who writes and therefore determines this fantasy fiction.

While *The Black Insider* foregrounds issues of race and sexuality as core themes, its treatment of interracial sex is unusually complex. The stereotype of the predatory black man and the innocent young white woman is called into question in this narrative, and even reversed – as if to disorient standard readings of those images. More so than in *The House of Hunger*, *The Black Insider* explores how *internalised* racism functions in an interracial sexual relationship. The account is more self-consciously fictional, and it involves a psychoanalytic investigation of libidinal drives, phallic symbols, fetishisms, and fears as it merges the conscious and the unconscious in a half imagined/ half real world. It considers, in some detail, how the racist attitudes of society are internalised, and – disturbingly - how violence can be an unpredictable and unconscious response. Although the novel ends sadly and brutally with the death of Helen, there is also a hint of optimism, not because this represents the death of colonial influences on identity, as Pattison suggests, but because the narrator is *empowered* by what Helen is able to give him. As he picks up the machine pistol that has fallen from her hands and takes aim at the enemy, he is spurred on to fight for survival. It is as if the Phallus, symbolising power, has been passed onto him. She – the black insider’s fictive creation – has reconfigured him, her lover and author, in a role he would not previously have imagined. The relationship thus represents an unpredictable interchange of gender roles.

The Black Insider is partly an indictment of racism, but the enemy is difficult to define. The Armageddon is sparked in the beginning by racial conflict: “All I know is that at one stage it was us blacks against the whites”, states the black insider, “But somehow or other things had become complicated and it was no longer a black against white chess game. It was more like a kaleidoscope in which every little chink of colour in the shaken picture was fighting every other little chink” (24). His interracial relationship further complicates a socially-conditioned impulse to identify with either black or white and to line oneself up under a particular banner. This impulse is shown to be futile.

Pattison claims that:

The relative coherency of *The House of Hunger* disintegrates in *Black Sunlight* and *The Black Insider* as his deteriorating mental health allowed him to experience the world only in disconnected insights and this fragmented

experience is reproduced in narratives lacking direction, cohesion, and continuity (2001: 123).

While I agree these novels are more difficult, I think this is a misreading because it discounts the author's obviously *deliberate* strategy to destabilise the very notion of psychic cohesion - which is itself a fiction. In *The Black Insider* (and more so in the *Black Sunlight* as we shall see) Marechera severely problematises the idea of "direction, cohesion and continuity" promoted by linear narratives and logocentrism. In fact, the black insider argues that:

Thoughts that think in straight lines cannot see round corners; the missionaries and teachers saw to that. We were taught to want to go to where a straight line goes and to look back over the shoulder to where straight lines come from.

Logic is an attitude. It freezes us forever in the icy tumult of all the cursed attitudes they stuffed into us. But even where thoughts have died, something ghostly lingers behind (Marechera 1990: 37).

It is not that he cannot write a cohesive text but rather that he refuses to do so. *The Black Insider*, in form and in theme, demonstrates that fictionalised unities cannot hold when faced with unconscious forces, particularly in a racist culture, that undermine and unsettle identity.

3. Postcolonial problematisations of the trope

Black Sunlight (1980)

Much controversy surrounds *Black Sunlight*, written just before Zimbabwe's attainment of independence. Upon his return to newly-independent Zimbabwe in 1981, Marechera was furious to discover his second-published novel had been banned by a censorship board which maintained "this is a book most members of the public would find highly offensive" (Veit-Wild 1992: 291-2). The board criticised "the clumsy and excessive use of four-letter obscenities" and objected to Marechera's "conscious effort to offend the religious convictions of Christians (pages 28-30 and 95) and Muslims and Buddhists (page 9)" (292) – statements such as "MOTHERFUCKING CHRIST!" (Marechera 1980: 95). Marechera of course rejected censorship on principle and resented the dismissal of the book on the grounds that it "has got no relevance to the development of the Zimbabwean nation" (quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 39). Academics at the University of Zimbabwe, including Musa Zimunya, Anthony Chennells and Aaron Hodza, launched a successful appeal and the ban was subsequently overturned.

In *Black Sunlight*, discrete categories of race are steadily eroded. Space and time are obscure: the novel is set in the midst of turmoil and guerrilla warfare, not in London, like *The Black Insider*, but in an unspecified African country. In his essay "Unstable Identities, Unstable Narratives in *Black Sunlight*", Chennells notes that with Marechera "[b]oth history and Christianity are rejected as sources of stable meaning" (1999: 51). Although "[r]oots, identity and ancestors are key words in cultural nationalism, Marechera refuses them any nationalist signification" (52).

The theme of black peril and white peril is addressed parodically on the first page of the novel, where the eccentric African Chief presiding over a pre-colonial enclave becomes erect at the thought of "white meat. White cunts. White arses..." (Marechera 1980: 1). White Woman is seen, offensively, as a sexual object to be conquered and devoured. But who, one must ask, is being offensive here? Is it the Chief, the narrator, Marechera or all three? Marechera's voice, as I have argued, is close to but not identical with his narrator's. In this case, both narrator and author are deriding clichés of corruption, subverting moral discourse, and exposing a grotesque role model at the heart of pre-colonial golden age mythology. This is not to excuse the reverse-racism and misogyny

with which the passage is charged, but to read it in the context of heavy irony. The chief also requests homosexual sex from the narrator, who is held captive: and a homophobic retort follows – a point for further discussion, from a queer perspective, in Chapter Three.

Representing white peril, also in semi-parodied form, is the Oxford University explorer and anthropologist, Blanche Goodfather, an androgynous figure, whose name ironically refers to a white or ‘whitening’ (*blanc / blanche*) benign patriarchy (good father). Christian describes her, however, as “the Tarzan to rescue me from my plight. Female Odysseus,” stating that “male Penelope awaits you warding off suitors by the stratagem of weaving words” (7) – a self-reflexive ironic comment on writing as a project. Mark Stein reads the opening scenes of the novel as “Christian’s flight from state repression,” (1999: 67) but observes that, “Goodfather, likely savior, is of course not a man but a woman, and not his parent but his lover. Here Tarzan and Odysseus are female and white, while Penelope is male and black. Textual (mythological, sexual and “racial”) inversions abound” (67).

The interracial sexual encounters are dosed with heavy irony and often turned upside down in their symbolism. Blanche is visited by twelve of the Chief’s men whilst sunbathing at Blunt Rock Falls. In the course of duty she has sex with all twelve who, it seems, have been sent to conquer (i.e. rape) her. But she resists being victimised in the sexualised game of domination and submission. “I bargained with them”, she says, persuading the men “it would be even more pleasureable to use my carton of Durex [condoms]” (Marechera 1980: 11). By orchestrating the encounter, she protects herself and turns the intended ‘rape’ into a bargained act of consent, where ‘pleasure’, not procreation, is the principle. Significantly, she is always in control of her reproductive organs, though, stating: “I always have my coil” (11). Thus, she prevents the possibility of miscegenation and, by implication, maintains the racial purity of the white civilisation she seems to represent. She also subverts traditional African masculinity where impregnation is held as a demonstration of manhood. Despite the ‘rape’ therefore, the African Chief’s men do not conquer Blanche Goodfather (i.e. white patriarchy). No one wins this symbolic stand-off, and neither imperialism nor African resistance to it is given dominance in the sphere of sexuality.

Black Sunlight begins by 'quoting' classic colonial myths of black and white peril only to subvert them. Stein argues that:

Marechera's quotation ...derides the source from which it is taken as well as the context into which it is inserted. Through this performative act, manipulating the meaning of the quotation and that of the old and new contexts, Marechera *exemplifies* the instability of "fixed meanings" and apparently withdraws into a realm beyond signification, as if to defy the danger of reduction. In literature, such an operation is of course called *parody* ... (1999: 67).

The interracial sex trope shifts again in meaning when Christian recounts a sado-masochistic sex session with Blanche Goodfather, whom he met while at Oxford. After the sex, he states:

The silence was even nastier than the experiments we had done on each others [*sic*] bodies. The beast had emerged from the lurid sunken depths and we had clawed, scratched, bit, drawn blood till our eyes had enflamed and frightened the dragon back into its lair in our bodies (Marechera 1980: 5).

Repressed racial animosities and curiosities emerge from "the lurid sunken depths" and find expression in the sex act. It is suggested Christian may unconsciously be trying to avenge himself on the prized possession of white civilisation - the body of a white woman, while Blanche may similarly be indulging fears and fetishes of the 'black savage'. Although Christian and Blanche eventually "frighten the dragon back into its lair" (which could be read as the unconscious), there is a sense that the wild creature will unleash its terror again, unexpectedly. With this episode Marechera seems to 'lay bare' Fanon's famous metaphor: "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilisation and dignity and make them mine" (Fanon 1967: 63) in a grotesque parody. This he does, it seems, in preparation for the subsequent destruction of discrete racial identities in a radically unstable narrative.

Significantly, race disappears as an issue after the first few pages of the novel. Although numerous sexual encounters occur and we suspect at times they are interracial, it becomes impossible to say for sure who is white and who is black. In an interview with Alle Lansu, Marechera explained that:

...some people have got a problem with *Black Sunlight*. They can't decide whether Sally or Nicola or Katherine or Sordid Joe are white or black, because I don't specify the race of anyone in there. If you have developed emotionally and intellectually to the stage where for you it's not the colour of the person but the fire which makes them unique as an individual, then it can be very boring and make one very angry to read a book which categorises everybody in terms of race. That's one of the problems of South African literature (Veit-Wild 1992: 29).⁴⁸

Following the anarchistic explosion of dominant structures and the disorientation of dichotomies in the first few pages, *Black Sunlight* becomes well nigh impossible to read as a comment on race, as the quote makes clear.

The strategy of creating characters of an indeterminate race is arguably all the more subversive of racial/cultural hygiene discourses precisely because of what it refuses to disclose to the reader. The idea of black and white peril arises precisely from invisibility, an inability to see the occurrence of racial and cultural 'contamination' through interracial sex. It is possible to shame and scapegoat visible transgressors but not invisible ones. For this reason, Marechera's blurring of racial identities in *Black Sunlight's* orgies is all the more unsettling (I will consider 'perversion' in *Black Sunlight* in more detail in Chapter Three). The strategy becomes difficult to sustain, though, as Marechera discovers upon his return from exile to independent Zimbabwe.

Black Sunlight, with its non-specific temporality and spatiality, written on the eve of independence, can be read as a transitional text, prefiguring and problematising the postcolonial scene of representation. Its initial banning confirms its reputation as a disturbing unsettling text, ahead of its time. More than two decades on, amidst the current turmoil of present-day Zimbabwe, it is now being re-read with a new-found poignancy.

⁴⁸ This is also a strategy employed by J.M. Coetzee in *The Life and Times of Michael K*, which Marechera reviewed and rated highly. See Veit-Wild (1992: 356-359).

In the autobiographical “Journal” appended to the *Mindblast* miscellany, Marechera records stubbornly hostile reactions in a post-independence Zimbabwe: “A black man in arms with a white woman was still something of a miracle in Harare. The acid comments and bitter glances spat at us from both black and white people” (Marechera 1984: 131). Animosity towards interracial relationships affected the author on a personal level since his intimate relationships tended to be with white women.⁴⁹

Mindblast returns to more distinct representations of race, only to transgress these in different ways. In subversive carnivalesque form, Marechera deploys the trope of interracial sex once again to ruffle the status quo. Despite the ‘liberation’ of Zimbabwe, little seems to have changed in the public mindset, or in the daily lives of “the povo” - a term used in Zimbabwe for the impoverished majority. Stinging Menippean satire is Marechera’s response in “The Skin of Time – Plays By Buddy”, contained in the *Mindblast* collection, which expose corruption and hypocrisy in the supposedly new Zimbabwe. The style is once again different: anxious self-reflection gives way to bawdy humour. “Scandalous and eccentric behaviour disrupts ‘the seemly course of human affairs’ and provides a new view of ‘the integrity of the world’. Society is unpredictable; roles can quickly change” (Marechera, quoted in Veit-Wild 1992: 364). The interracial sex trope functions mainly to mock hypocrisy, expose corruption and subvert hierarchies. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, “carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privilege, norms and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 1968: 109)

In “The Coup”, the first play, a business takeover is staged in military fashion by Norman Drake, who deposes his brother-in-law, Spotty, from the managerial position of an influential company with close links to the government. In the second play, the Honourable Comrade Minister Nzuzu, who has collaborated in the coup, hosts a party to celebrate with friends and allies. However, he is anything but “Honourable” and nor is the behaviour of his guests. (‘The Party’ doubles in meaning as a comment on

⁴⁹ “The Journal” makes mention one or two of these, though apparently, several references to relationships had to be omitted from the book because they were potentially libellous. Stanley Nyamfukudza, who edited *Mindblast*, states “I discovered also that I had not been sufficiently vigilant and there were a couple of former girlfriends of his who felt that they had been libellously described in the text. He did tend to want to settle old scores in that manuscript, which I felt was wrong” (Veit-Wild 1992: 339).

corruption in the ruling ZANU-PF party). The stage is abuzz with bed-hopping, bribery and corruption. Interracial sexual relationships become commonplace and the colour bar erodes into oblivion as taboos are flouted and double standards exposed. In all there are at least five different interracial couplings: Louise (white secretary to Drake) is married to Alfie (a black Rastafarian); Spotty (a white racist) is having an affair with Arabella (a black housekeeper); Jane (white wife to Spotty) is dating the new Reserve Bank Mangaer (who is black, we think); Lydia (black wife to the Minister) is having an affair with Drake (who is white and unmarried), and Dick (the white son of Spot and Jane) is having frequent sex with Raven (the black daughter of Lydia and the Minister).

The interracial sex trope serves several functions, one of which is to mock political pretensions. Some of the relationships symbolise political and economic alliances in newly independent Zimbabwe. “Comrade Ministers” and their relatives, who supposedly represent the interests of the oppressed black majority, are literally hopping into bed with white business tycoons and their relatives. When Jane and Drake discover Louise is “Married to an African” (Marechera 1984: 32), they burst into laughter. However, Drake, the crooked business opportunist, quickly says, “Come, come Jane. It’s the year of transformation. We are all Comrade-In-Laws these days” (32). One sex scandal leads to another as Jane then admits that she also has a “comrade up [her] sleeve [:]...He’s something high in the Reserve Bank” (32). Money and power are the ultimate goals in this game; and interracial affairs as well as marriages of convenience consolidate the privileged position of a new multi-racial elite, who have no real concern for the impoverished majority.⁵⁰

The Honourable Comrade Minister Nzuzu is supposed to be an upstanding representative of the new socialist government, but he takes bribes and does deals with the unscrupulous white business tycoon - Drake. Nzuzu’s wife, Lydia, also has a vested interest of her own in Drake. In one episode, shortly after the Minister leaves the stage, she “assaults [Drake’s] lips forcefully and lingeringly” (34) (significantly subverting the submissive black woman/dominant white man stereotype in another twist). This happens just as Lydia’s daughter, Raven, and Drake’s nephew, Dick, emerge from the toilet with “clothes rumpled and bedraggled” (34) (obviously having had sex there). There can be no more keeping up appearances when the adulterous parents and

⁵⁰ This echoes Ruth Weiss’s (1994) observation that a single multi-racial elite class was being established in Zimbabwe shortly after independence, politicians striking deals with business opportunists.

delinquent children all stumble upon each other awkwardly outside the toilet (a scatological centre-piece of the drama). At first Lydia is upset by the idea of Raven's having been 'seduced' by Drake's nephew; but later she warms to the prospect when Drake proposes a lucrative 'marriage of alliance' between the teenagers. This will no doubt involve a generous financial settlement - which will accrue to Lydia - and solidify a corrupt alliance between the families.⁵¹

Another function of interracial relationships in these plays is to expose and ridicule racist attitudes and to highlight hypocrisy. Even the most hardened of racists – the comical character Spotty - is having an affair with a black woman, Arabella, who is his housekeeper and mistress. In a scene which recalls *House of Hunger* (the dialogue between Julia and the narrator), Arabella rebukes Alfie for marrying a white woman: "What have they got which we black girls haven't got?...I mean why not marry your own people?" (39). But Alfie discovers she is "the black girl who was going to take the gap with Spotty Down South" (39). Arabella had been planning to emigrate to South Africa (then still under apartheid) with her white (supposedly racist) lover.

Hypocritical affairs are nevertheless juxtaposed with moments of honesty. For example Dick wonders why he and Raven "can't have our sex without locking doors...we are not corrupt businessmen (32). He dislikes keeping his relationship with Raven behind closed doors. In another example of honesty and openness, Louise and Alfie arrive at the party as a couple making no secret of their marriage, but they suffer abuse as a result, which indicates that despite the regime change, old habits die hard. When Alfie emerges from the toilet and leaves the stage with Louise, a group of white men, waiting in the queue for the loo, are infuriated. The 1st Man says "I always said that what these black bastards mean by liberation is just to screw white pussy," (1984: 40) to which the 2nd Man declares, "There's gratitude for you. For seventeen years we fought to protect our women and at the drop of independence the tarts jump into bed with the very bastards we were protecting them from. Tsk Tsk Tsk" (40).

The interracial coupling of Louise and Alfie can still provoke visceral reaction amongst these men, who plan a lynching and threaten to "fix that kaffir for good after the party" (40). Here we have stereotypical racism (and misogyny) and a revival of old colonial attitudes. Alfie is seen as thumbing his nose at the old master by taking a white woman

⁵¹ I am developing previous research here. See Shaw (1997: 151).

as his wife. Louise is seen to have betrayed the white cause by jumping into bed with a black man. The only honest interracial relationship at the party is not respected as such either by whites (including ‘liberals’ such as Drake and Jane) or blacks (for example Arabella). Here, Marechera shows that colonial discursive structures remain resilient in the supposedly liberated new Zimbabwe.

This episode recalls the incident in ‘House of Hunger’ where the narrator and his white girlfriend, Patricia, also experience a lynching at the hands of white racists. However, in this case Alfie and Louise escape the threatened violence and the incident is couched in humour. Macho white male colonial culture is derided and even rendered pathetic when one of the men in the queue “bursts into tears and in the sight of God and the whole queue starts to wet his pants” (41). The aggressors thus become the victims of public ridicule and humiliation. Such reversals, and a return to the great leveller of bodily functions, are typical of the carnivalesque genre – effectively mobilised for satire by Marechera in the post-independence context. With *Mindblast*, Marechera takes the trope of interracial sex out of the national unconscious and puts it back in the bloodstream of post-independence politics and culture, showing its continued relevance as well as its perpetual re-emergence and divergence. He returns to old structures only to transgress them in new ways. In this case, humour is an important element in the strategy.⁵²

⁵² A significantly new dimension to interracial relationships is introduced in “Grimknife Jr’s Story”, later in *Mindblast*, where a black woman and a white woman have a lesbian liaison. Grace, a Zimbabwean singer-songwriter hooks up with Rita, an American flower-power girl from San Francisco. We are led to believe she is white because she is barred by the authorities from setting up a street theatre: they ask her if she thinks she is still living in Rhodesia - a typical reprimand for whites at the time (Marechera 1984: 69). Although this may exemplify love across the colour bar, it is not represented as such. As in *Black Sunlight* race is difficult to discern. This episode will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

4. Love and Desire Across the Colour Bar in Marechera's Poetry (written in Zimbabwe in the 1980s)

Love poetry is taboo in the dominant culture of Zimbabwe. Raising the issue for debate, in an essay entitled "Culture as Censorship", Chenjerai Hove asks:

How many of us can write an erotic piece? No, we would shy away from the public glare. Can we write of the body of a woman or of a man, in all its sexuality? We cannot do so because people in this part of the world will say, this does not happen in our culture. Isn't culture a lie with which we all concur? (2002: 10-11).

Marechera's treatment of love, desire and sex is unprecedented in Zimbabwean poetry.⁵³ Unfortunately most of this was rejected for publication prior to his death in 1987. It ventures, as Hove suggests honest writing should do, into taboo territory. Still, it seems there are limits to what Hove considers acceptable. In 1986, as a Senior Editor for Zimbabwe Publishing House, he recommended the rejection of thirty-five poems (several with erotic and love themes) by Marechera, partly because "the imagery and references are to the Greek and Roman worlds," and also because of "derogatory references to women" (Veit-Wild 1992: 350). An element of misogyny, I agree, is undeniable but I disagree with Hove for reasons I will further discuss in Chapter Two. The point here is that Marechera clearly writes outside of what has been deemed acceptable, even for other writers, who are popularly considered to hold progressive views on gender.

Key to a proper appreciation of Marechera's poetry is recognition of its individual voice. If the fusion of autobiography with fiction lends Marechera's prose writing an introspective quality, his poetic voice is perhaps even more deeply personal. This is the case with his love and erotic poetry. Yet, it is not socially irrelevant for this reason. Despite the poetry's personal quality, as Dirk Kloppe observes in his reading of "Throne of Bayonets", "Marechera's text functions as the unconscious of the social, revealing that which the official ideology has repressed. But it is equally the case that the social constitutes the unconscious of the text (1999: 30). There is, I agree, a crucial

⁵³ Most notably Yvonne Vera, in her all of her novels, but especially *Butterfly Burning* (1998), has begun to pioneer a feminine erotics in the national literature.

link here, but it is also true that Marechera strains this link. There is an excessive and unpredictable element in his writing which is uniquely individual, that psychosocial modes of analysis ultimately fail to account for.

The Amelia Sonnets⁵⁴

The Amelia sonnets (a set of nine) are particularly personal because here the speaker, in coded form, expresses his love and desire for a white woman. It is untypical of Marechera to adopt a subtle approach to taboo subjects. However, in an interview with Veit-Wild, Marechera compares his strategy to that of Shakespeare:

In some of his mysterious sonnets to the “Dark Lady” or to the “Young Man” Shakespeare was trying in his own way to express what then was a rather subversive subject: the theme of homosexuality and the theme of his having been in love with a black woman whom, according to Anthony Burgess, he met in Bristol. He was writing about these (for his time) scandalous relationships, without of course ever mentioning a name. You find him using the form of the sonnet for what must have been a very bewildering emotion, at least for something which could not be publicly expressed without causing outrage and scandal. But through the sonnet form he achieved that highest point of the sublime and beautiful. A reader can enjoy the poems without being outraged by the emotions underlying them (Marechera 1992: 214).⁵⁵

The Amelia sonnets hybridise the elegy and the sonnet, taking these very old forms into an African setting. There is an element of ambiguity and mystery in them and it is not immediately obvious they are addressed to a white woman. Veit-Wild asks why and Marechera replies: “Because for me, personally, it is not a problem. It is just another human relationship you can write about. I actually find love of people of the same race

⁵⁴ Marechera apparently derived the name Amelia from Heinrich Heine’s *Das Buch der Lieder*, which is based on the ill-fated love affair between Heine and his cousin Amalie (Fischer 1991: 35). This book cover can be seen alongside that of *The Grass is Singing* in the photograph of Marechera appended. The Amelia sonnets first appeared in the *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe* anthology, edited by Flora Veit-Wild in 1988. They were later reprinted in the *Cemetery of Mind* anthology in 1992.

⁵⁵ Regarding Shakespeare’s lovers this is speculation on Burgess’s and Marechera’s part of course but the point remains valid regardless.

very much as incest..." (Marechera 1992: 215). Marechera's incest analogy for love between two people of the same race is highly subversive and provocative. Refusing to consider love across the colour bar as 'perversion', he instead considers the opposite to be true, so turning standard significations of normality and abnormality on their heads. He continues:

Amelia is white, I am black. But I am the one full of digressions and frustrations. Amelia does not have any sense of race. In a very personal sense it does not matter at all what race Amelia is but there are times, especially when I have gone through some shitty incidents or I remember some of the things which were happening here before 1980, that's when I feel very violent towards Amelia. That's when this brutality from the township comes out and even when I am making love to her I find that I am actually with my whole self trying to fool myself that I am revenging myself against the whole white race. Afterwards, of course, one realises that it was simply an illusion that one can revenge oneself on history (Marechera 1992: 215-216).

The poet's admission of a range of responses in his love for Amelia recalls the "psychoanalytic ambivalence of the Unconscious, its turning from love to hate, mastery to servitude," described by Bhabha in his study of Fanon (Bhabha 1986: x).

Also striking in the Amelia sonnets and in his other erotic poetry is the unapologetic description of sexual enjoyment - this in opposition to the popularly held notion in some African societies that:

...woman is simply there to bear children and that in love-making it is the man who has the right and the prerogative to enjoy not just sexual pleasure but also impregnation. So sheer sexual pleasure, without impregnation, where both are enjoying themselves, is something which is considered extraordinary here. The woman is not supposed to enjoy herself, and if she does, that is seen as a sign of her immorality and perversion (Marechera 1992: 216).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ This idea is confirmed by the author/film-maker, Tsitsi Dangarembga, who indicts the sexual oppression of black women most directly in *She No Longer Weeps* (1987).

Asked by Veit-Wild why there are so few African love poems, Marechera comments that:

I think, in a very macho society, to display feelings of love is actually to display weakness, that it is not male, that it is not a sign of strength to in any way emotionally rely on another person, and also that virility, male sexuality, is not dependent on mutual understanding but on conquest, that it is the woman who is conquered every time she is with the man. That is the kind of attitude I grew up with in Vengere township. That's what I also wrote about in *The House of Hunger*. The idea that a man who does not beat up his wife occasionally is said not to love her at all (217).

The poems subvert standard notions of masculinity in the African context. Yet they themselves are subject to feminist criticism. Sonnet writing, he declares, “demands total control: control of the language, tightened syntax, and – if I may say so – a very rigorous knowledge of myth and legend.” In this manner, he “can enclose the most outrageous statement within some ancient myth” (215). A phallogentric, masculinist impulse can be alleged of Marechera’s “total control” of the poems, despite his gesture away from male domination. They have also been read as misogynist because the body of the woman is usually depicted (as in the modernist poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot) not as an entity in itself, but in fragments. For example, an image of “blue eyes” in “Her Hand My Eyes Closes” gives the only hint that this is a white woman (171). More controversially, we are presented with a woman’s body dissected in “Th’ Anniversary”: “On my seventh drink she appeared in strips/ Of rotting flesh and faintly gleaming bones – Her / Hollow eye sockets instantly found me” (173). The removal of her skin can be read as an extreme transgression of the colour bar – though this does not seem to be the main point of the poem (I will deal more at length with feminist criticisms of Marechera in Chapter Two).

Typical of Marechera, these representations are inconsistent. In her study of the poems, Regula Fischer notes that the nine sonnets are “Marked by an abundance of contradictory feelings and emotions, they reverberate with terror, disgust, agony, despair and loneliness but also with tenderness, caring[,] love and the fear of losing the beloved one” (Fischer 1991: 34). Fischer remarks on the fact that “Female figures in Marechera’s works in general are very contradictory and so is Amelia. She is

metamorphic and changes her appearance several times throughout the sonnets.” She is dead in “Amelia”, she figures as a ghost in “A Cemetery in the Mind”, is a prostitute in “Primal Vision” and a devil in “The Visitor” (38). I will consider the last of these in more detail.

The Visitor

Is she what I was, what I would be, what I have never been?
Is she the ghost of my youth’s bitter longings, the almost
Crazed visions of life’s beauty which then I sought in excursion
And friendly rhyme? The crust of the unattainable on my tongue
Unleashed me from home and country – to regions of searching mind
And nerve-racked imagination till like Pygmalion I felt
Her first fragrant breath on my cheek and the hot blood
Coursing through her veins – my life’s work at last fulfilled!
But before a year was out, from all sides, jeers, sneers upon us stung
And she, my human hunger, grew pale, lost appetite, became haggard
Shunned by her own kind. Outraged storms, as if fired from some
Celestial cannon up there, day after day blew down upon us. Amelia
Drowned. I shunned man and his daylight ways. I made the terrible pact
And nightly may visit her in spite of her horns and forked tail!

(Marechera 1992: 174; and Veit-Wild 1988: 142)

The sonnet begins, revisiting the Petrarchan tradition, by expressing the desires and pains of an adoring lover, who is however noticeably narcissistic in his reflections. Marechera borrows the Petrarchan octave and sestet form, dividing the poem into two distinct parts, though not adhering to any rhyme scheme. Traditionally a problem is stated in the octave and resolved somehow in the sestet. In an ostentatious break with the Petrarchan conceit however, “fulfilled!” marks the end of the octave, indicating (sexual) resolution near the middle of the poem. Marechera thereby shifts from the idea of *permanently unrequited* love, central to the Petrarchan conceit, transforming this instead to a focus on forbidden love, which is nevertheless consummated. Desire is strengthened all the more because it is forbidden. But when it is fulfilled, it is doomed

to disaster in a world of boundaries and prejudices. So the sestet deconstructs the idealism of the octave, focusing instead on the complications of transgressive love.

The speaker craves perfection as he fashions his ideal lover, like Pygmalion. According to the myth, Pygmalion sculptured a female statue in his imagination and animated her with the help of Venus. Similarly, the speaker in this sonnet creates his ideal lover in his imagination. Unlike in the traditional sonnet, therefore, the speaker's gaze is not directed outwards towards the object of his affections, but inwards: "Is she what I was, what I would be, what I have never been?" He asks himself if the lover is in fact a part of himself. In other words he self-consciously recognises a narcissistic element in his desire. She comes into being like Pygmalion's 'doll' and the lover's dream is fulfilled. However, the speaker's satisfaction is short-lived because their relationship meets with hostility in society: "from all sides, jeers, sneers upon us stung." Because she is "Shunned by her own kind," she loses her lustre and grows pale and ill. Their love cannot exist in a worldly form, not because the mistress rejects her lover, but because society will not tolerate a mixed race relationship: this is the "outrageous secret" hidden – though not very well - by the form of the poem.⁵⁷

Her death is figured metaphorically: the speaker cannot live with his ideal lover in this world so he visits her nightly, perhaps in dream and fantasy, in an imaginary other world where she is a devil. Love, therefore, is immortalised in a highly ironic manner, but as Fischer notes, "the author exposes the falsity of the romantic dream," and "he is very much aware of the fragility and transitoriness of love" (1991: 42). Amelia is "The Visitor", as the title suggests; she is not here to stay. In this sonnet, the ideal lover and love affair are self-consciously recognised as the product of dreams and fantasies. Yet there is still an unsettling tension between the imaginary world and the real world, especially if one considers the Amelia character to be based on a real woman, a real lover.

⁵⁷ He experiments with other forms too, however, where racial differences of the lovers is explicit. See for example "My Arms Vanished Mountains" (Marechera 1992: 115- 136) and T.O. McLoughlin's analysis of it (1999: 137-150).

In the Petrarchan conceit, the ideal lover would more likely be an angel so this is part-love poetry, part-parody.⁵⁸ It is also an anti-racist manoeuvre: “In Europe,” Fanon writes, “the black man is the symbol of evil” (1967: 188). As Marriott elaborates, he is “a black devil from whom the Europeans, and especially European women, shrink in fright” (2000: 66). Marechera is only too aware of this as “I am the Rape”, his other poem, evinces. Instead of a black man as devil and object of awe, Marechera reverses the racist imago, turning the white woman into a devilish object of awe. In an added twist, however, he loves her “in spite of her horns and forked tail!” With Marechera, interracial love is a trope that both fuses and subverts traditional connections between the lovers, between black and white, Africa and Europe.

In these poems Marechera shifts in and out of specific contexts and imaginary worlds, revisiting, re-evaluating and reconstructing Graeco-Roman myths, marrying them controversially with a modern African context. Marechera talks of a “refusal to be bound by any period of human history” (Marechera 1992: 168). While the poems are deeply personal in character they are also non-specific about their setting. He comments that “The ghosts which hover over Great Zimbabwe are the same as those which tormented Troy, those which overwhelmed Carthage, and which watched over Aenias” (168). An ‘interracial’ blending, or ‘miscegenation’ metaphor thus applies to Marechera’s hybridisation, his mixing and (mis)matching of forms and contents, and of historical time.

He describes love as “such a typhoon of a subject” that it requires “a structure which will contain all the contradictions emotion includes”(214). For Marechera, the absence of an African love poetry tradition necessitates the ‘borrowing’ of tried and tested forms from elsewhere in the world, not merely to mimic but also to adapt and transform (and subvert if need be). In his lecture, “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature”, Marechera states: “That Europe had, to say the least, a head start in written literature is an advantage for the African writer: he does not have to solve many problems of structure – they have already been solved” (Veit-Wild 1992: 363). But he is not unaware of controversy on the subject and opines: “I do not consider influences pernicious: they are a type of apprenticeship” (363). The poems, although they are uneven in quality, can be read as experimental in this manner. In his combination of the

⁵⁸ It becomes somewhat reminiscent of Shakespeare’s parody of ‘ideal love’ (courtly love) in, for example, “My Mistress’ Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun”.

elegy and the sonnet he claims he was trying to find a form “suitable for its expression of sentiment or the expression of tragic reflection or simply the depiction of beauty” but which “does not have a strict form” (214).

The erotic poems, dealing with a somewhat different impulse, do not display as much subtlety with subject matter, as the following example demonstrates:

What rough night erased the bloom

What rough night erased the bloom from ruby lips?
Course hands tampering her secret’s petal blue eyes
Pelvic fury drastic intimacy joy of fistkisses
And O what surrender out of her out of me judders –

Wheels spinning at cliffedge – sky’s immense tumult
Cannot halt desire’s frenzy
Sweatsoaked sheets in the gloaming dark
Fingertip luminaries touch’s tracteries tongue to tongue
And Yes what surrender out of her out of me judders –

(Marechera 1992: 155)

The speaker begins with a question, not to the lover (because she is later mentioned in the third person) but to himself or the reader, about a moment of passion and its after effects. We know that the woman is white because of “her secret’s petal blue eyes”. Once again, given its context, this is a scandalous poem exploring desire and depicting sex between a black man and a white woman. In the moments before orgasm it notes a tension between a confused and excited state of mind at the “cliffedge – sky’s immense tumult” and an unstoppable drive (“Wheels spinning”). The refrain at the end of each stanza recollects a moment of “surrender” of an almost violent intensity, but one that comes “out of her out of me” apparently at the same time. The depiction of the sex-act is one of erotic interaction (“Fingertip luminaries touch’s tracteries tongue to tongue”), quite beautiful in its imagery, followed by a mutual yielding to the orgasmic impulse. This is significant in the Zimbabwean context because it breaks with the standard

understanding of sex being primarily for the pleasure of the dominant (i.e. male) partner.

T.O. McLoughlin notes that “Marechera’s appeal to younger Zimbabwean black writers continues to prompt a poetic response” (1999: 137). What is it that appeals about Marechera’s poetry? McLoughlin ventures:

[it] is a voice of yearning for liberation ... of the individual person from silence. The voice yearns for personal integrity, or a relationship, or release or a life and a society free from prejudices – be they social, racial, political, or ideological – welcoming to self-knowledge, intolerant of hypocrisy (138).

The examples of Marechera’s writing in this chapter are representative of most of his writing stages and published work, excepting the posthumous collection, *Scrapiron Blues*. Here, the interracial sex trope is most notable in the author’s absurdist, surrealistic play entitled *The Alley* and it involves transvestism and lesbianism. I will address this in Chapter Three. It remains for me to situate Marechera on the subject of interracial sexuality within contemporary Zimbabwean literature.

5. Interracial Sexuality in Other Contemporary Zimbabwean Literature

Stanlake Samkange, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, addresses the taboo of interracial sexuality in his 1975 novel, *The Mourned One*, detailing the injustice suffered by Ndatshana, falsely accused of rape, at the hands of a fearful racist society. Significantly, the narrative focuses on what *did not* happen between him and Bessie Dobbs, his accuser, as it highlights a travesty of justice: “He wished to ravish her but, fortunately, he did not succeed. Notwithstanding that, the court finds he committed rape as defined by the law,” declares the judge (1975: 141). The mourned one’s rape trial and death sentence frames his poignant life-story. Significantly, a letter to Dr. Samkange, cited in the epilogue, suggests a platonic relationship, which was misconstrued: “the woman in question was a friend of Ndatshana” (148). However, the two used to visit one another frequently, and sometimes at night. In addressing the taboo, and declaring the mourned one innocent of it, Samkange to a great extent maintains and reinforces it, avoiding the issue of actual interracial desire and sex.

Few Zimbabwean writers besides Lessing and Marechera have written in depth and detail on this subject, in a manner that collapses the gulf between black and white. However, recent Zimbabwean writing suggests this trend may slowly be changing.

Charles Mungoshi’s *The Empty House* (1997)

Charles Mungoshi, a contemporary of Marechera’s and a well-known veteran of Zimbabwean literature, was short-listed for the Caine Prize in 2000 for his collection of short stories, *Walking Still* (1997). He focuses on an interracial marriage one of these stories, *The Empty House*, but does not significantly problematise the structures that hold the notion of a gulf between black and white in place. The transgression is viewed cynically by a third person narrator and later assimilated into the dominant order in a non-threatening way.

Gwizo Maneto, an artist and social outcast in a society where art is “a foreign thing, a disease” (Mungoshi 1997: 83), suddenly becomes famous and successful, but only after marrying Agatha McFarland, a white American woman, who promotes his paintings overseas. “It wasn’t quite a marriage, people said ... How could it be called a marriage when there had been no bride price paid to the bride’s people?... It was really a joke

and people had come to Gwizo and Agatha's wedding to laugh" (89). Mr Maneto boycotts the wedding and disowns his son – at first: "Just the thought of the potential colour of his grandchildren gave Gwizo's father heartburn" (89). Later, however, when the marriage consolidates Gwizo's fame and fortune, Mr Maneto gives his blessing – quite literally – by impregnating Agatha in place of his impotent son. Maneto, an opportunistic businessman at heart, despises Gwizo's art career until it becomes lucrative.

The mildly ironic third person narrator highlights ulterior motives for the interracial marriage and the affair. Gwizo, it is suggested, wants to spite the community that shuns him: "he secretly, almost guiltily, enjoyed being with her. Yet still, deep down, guilt lurked, a sense of betraying his people – as if he had an unfair advantage over them" (85) – advantageous because she represents his 'fast track' to Western wealth and prosperity. But Gwizo also feels used by Agatha: "I'm just another commercial item you've picked up on your great romantic safari through Africa," (88) he says. A scornful enemy confirms this popularly-held view: "She came, she saw she conquered" (97). But this is not entirely accurate. It might also be described as a marriage of convenience – mutually 'exploitative'.

Unlike with Marechera, there is no internalised reflection on desire in this story. In fact, the narrator seems sceptical about this possibility. Gwizo has none for Agatha, except, occasionally, an image of her inspires his art. He has just one painting of her in which "He reveals her as his Guardian Angel, Lucky Star, Muse, Mother, Sweetheart, Confidante" (89). The narrator describes this sardonically, as he does Gwizo's sudden artistic inspiration from an unexpected pose at the end: "The exquisite shock of it – *Woman at Window*" (103). Agatha is significant to Gwizo as an image, not much more. She shows a sisterly love for Gwizo and a strong desire to integrate herself into his family and culture – but not a sexual love. In any event, his excessive drinking and impotence prevents this. Partly out of sympathy for her husband (unmanly in the eyes of society) she pretends the child she carries is Gwizo's: "I did it for you," she says, but also because his father "wanted an heir" (104). Gwizo is outraged and moves, weakly, to strangle her in the last line of the story, as if in a final attempt to dominate. He is portrayed as a pathetic figure though, emasculated in as much as Agatha will always be the dominant partner in this arrangement.

Mark Maneto's illicit affair with his son's wife, culminating in the pregnancy, is also represented as mercenary. For him, it solidifies a business bond, substituting perhaps for the absent bride-price. Although it is a mutually consenting arrangement, it can also be seen as an act of masculine provenance, of conquest and possession, and a slap in the face to Gwizo, whom he has never liked. Consciously or unconsciously it could also be an act of retribution (in the Fanonian sense) against the white man – although this is merely hinted in the text, not explored. Before the marriage, Mrs Maneto tells Gwizo he will be the second Maneto to have sex with a white woman: his great-grandfather was “hanged for raping one of their women” (87). This explains her husband's strange but frequent curse: “I swear on the head of Chigaga Maneto whom the whiteman hanged[.]” (87) and perhaps a jealous desire to take his son's place in enacting this ‘revenge’. Despite Agatha's view that “the Old Man was the most likeable of the lot” (90), Gwizo thinks “she, too, had been caught in the Old Man's snare. People called it ‘charisma’” (86). The charm is seen as purely self-serving.

With the theme of interracial sex, Mungoshi is critical of double standards and the materialistic attitudes that determine these, but he does not significantly deviate from standard problematic perceptions. Neither the marriage nor the affairs are taken seriously in and of themselves, but explained largely in terms of deterministic economic relations and personal agendas. There is no real analysis of the inner dynamics of the relationships. The analysis is sociologically rather than psychoanalytically focused; and the interracial affairs slip back into the conventional representational and signifying systems. Mungoshi's treatment of the taboo is more one of assimilation than transgression.

In *The Empty House* the idea of sex across the colour bar shifts slightly out of the category of ‘perversion’ towards social accommodation but is still situated in close proximity to the idea of abnormality and strangeness. The interracial marriage is linked with Gwizo's impotence and the loss of his creative spark. It is also seen as a sign of cultural imperialism, producing only facile and inauthentic art (83). Mungoshi does little to unpick these problematic associations.

Shimmer Chinodya's *Play Your Cards* (1998)

Shimmer Chinodya's writing is becoming increasingly experimental, as well as daring and transgressive in its investigation of the psychosexual. In this respect, he shows somewhat of an affinity with Marechera. He is best known for *Harvest of Thorns* (1989), a classic liberation struggle novel, but one that resists dichotomous views and instead highlights elements of contradiction. *Can We Talk and Other Stories* (1998), which was short-listed for the Caine Prize in 2000, and which begins a noticeable break with the predominant genre of social realism, is Chinodya's most experimental text to date.

His exploration of deceit and infidelity in one of the stories, *Play Your Cards*, is more reflective on actual desire between a black man and a white woman than Mungoshi's text. Timothy, husband to Chipo and father to Tapiwa, has an affair with Maria, a wealthy European woman who in the end discovers his lies and turns the tables on him. "He would sleep with her till 2 am," we are told, "then return home because Tapiwa (his 4 year old) would want to see him before he left for work" (Chinodya 2001: 73). The relationship seems purely exploitative on Timothy's part: he makes numerous phone calls from Maria's house and burns her Jaguar's exhaust out with excessive travel. Stories about being under siege from the extended family system are in fact a cover for other illicit activities.

The metaphorical framework of their relationship is cards - "a game of life or death, a ferocious contest" (72) but one where – for a moment – they are equal players. Chinodya briefly gestures towards reflection on desire and power relations in an interracial relationship. Within the card-playing games, desire is linked with domination:

Often when she won he felt the urge to subdue her in his hot manly way. The razor-sharp vengeance with which they played each other, was almost childish, a sweet but cruel delight. (He adored her face, her neat mouth and her fresh smile. He cherished her plump body for its corpulence, and it made him feel good to be slim.) (73).

Later there is anger and jealousy in Maria's tone when she questions him about other mistresses: "Do we all give you our cars to do as you please? Do we all surrender our telephones, our booze, our bodies to you?" (80). But Timothy alleges mutual exploitation – that she has been trying to get pregnant by him without his prior consent. She admits, "Yes, I wanted your baby. But I wasn't going to force you into anything" (80). He then says, "You played your cards so well. I was your guinea-pig all along" (80). The acrimony, however, derives from an element of real intimacy and passion between the two. But the flipside of this intimacy is fear. Till now Maria has acted acquiescently, but in their last encounter she now asserts herself as the dominant partner: "She had a steely strength which he had never realized, never imagined. He was afraid to touch her – for the first time since he had known her, she terrified him" (80-81). Chinodya highlights uncertainty in this sudden destabilisation of roles.

His treatment of the theme of interracial sexuality is less determined by the dominant representational system than is Mungoshi's and less certain of itself - in a Marecheran way. He moves further to problematise the notion of a fundamental rift between black and white through the actual depiction of desire, and the expression of a range of emotions - love, anger, jealousy, etc. - that accompany it across the colour bar. Although there are also arguments between the 'lovers' in *The Empty House*, there is little genuine dialogue. Mungoshi seems at times to simply acknowledge and not problematise the idea of certain fundamental differences. Chinodya's gesture towards more inward reflection in this narrative, which has begun tentatively with the mention of desire and uncertainty, continues with Maria dreaming about Timothy's mentally disturbed mother at the close of the story.

Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998)

Yvonne Vera, another major Zimbabwean writer who has transgressed so many other taboos in her writing, briefly addresses an interracial relationship in *Butterfly Burning*. The book, set in a Bulawayo township in the 1940s, follows Phephelaphi's troubled journey towards emancipation – from a love affair to pregnancy, self-abortion and, tragically, self-immolation. Phephelaphi, is orphaned under mysterious circumstances. Towards the end of the novel, Fumbatha, her lover, angry about the abortion, discloses the secret:

I know everything about your mother too. Your mother Gertrude. She was killed by her lover, a white policeman who shot at her when he found her talking to another man at her door when he called on her after midnight. The white policeman who then took it upon himself to bury her for you because he knew all about it since he was there. Perhaps she had killed his child too though I do not think he would have cared but he cared enough about her meeting someone else. Did he not? He shot and buried her calmly too (Vera 1998: 122).

It seems a crime of passion, but a racist one. In Fumbatha's account, the jealous lover, on the surface, has little regard for black life. (But then why, we might ask, is he so jealous?) He can quite easily kill his black lover, calmly bury her, and apparently think nothing of it. While Vera suggests a degree of complexity in this interracial relationship and exposes contradictions in its representation, she does not fully explore these. The account keeps within the trope of white male domination versus black female submission, seeming to confirm, thereby, an inherent tendency towards exploitation, and the idea that there is a fundamental rift between the races despite cross-racial sexual intimacy. Not having moved far from deterministic structures on this issue, Vera's is a markedly different treatment of the theme compared with Marechera's.

The treatment of interracial sexuality by Mungoshi especially, but also Chinodya to an extent, foregrounds issues of procreation (and Vera appears somewhat caught in this pattern of representation too, as we see in the passage cited above). Lessing's and Marechera's treatment tends to focus more on transgressive desire. It is also notable that while Lessing and Marechera write about white settler women (Mary and Patricia) in their major Zimbabwean-themed narratives, Mungoshi and Chinodya write about American and European women, respectively.⁵⁹ This externalises the taboo and displaces its intensity to a great extent. Within white settler mythology at least, a black man having sexual relations with a foreign white woman is not nearly as transgressive as a black man having the same with a white settler woman (i.e. born and bred into the specific structures of white Rhodesian/Zimbabwean culture). Judging from the above representations, it seems that the standard perception of a gulf between black and white (still present in everyday discourse, abundantly evident in Mugabe's crude speeches and in Zimbabwe's state-controlled media) is not *fundamentally* called into question by

⁵⁹ However, many of Marechera's white female characters are obviously also from abroad.

Mungoshi or Vera, as it is by Marechera, and to an extent by Lessing and Chinodya. It hardly needs stating that Marechera is by far the most transgressive and challenging writer on the subject of interracial sexuality in the Zimbabwean context to date.

Marechera takes the theme of interracial sexual relations onto a new plane. Moving much further than any other writer to date in his investigation, Marechera not only presents an articulate black male voice on the question of “What does a black man want?” (regarding white women). He also follows the trope of interracial transgression, as we will see in Chapter Three, into the uncharted terrain of same-sex sexuality, representing relationships between black and white men; a black woman and a white woman; and a black transvestite and a white man.

6. Conclusions

In seeing the taboo and transgression of sex across the colour bar as much as a psychical as a sociological phenomenon, Marechera poses a unique challenge to Zimbabwean literature and cultural studies. He asks not only: What is the taboo and why does it persist? but also: How do racialised attitudes towards sex become internalised? And how best does one confront internalised racism? Thirty years on from Lessing's groundbreaking novel on the subject, Marechera returns with his transgressive trope of interracial sexuality in *House of Hunger* to comment subversively on colonial domination in its dying days, then in other texts to interrogate internalised racism in African men exiled in Europe. In *Black Sunlight* the trope destroys the dominant representational system and imagines a non-racial future. In the erotic and love poetry the trope deconstructs racialised attitudes from deep within the individual psyche. In *Mindblast*, it returns to problematise racialised attitudes still lingering in the post-independence national psyche.⁶⁰

Marechera is significant because he confronts the lingering determinism of old sexual-racial structures beyond the demise of colonialism - which, he demonstrates, are most stubborn when internalised. Rejecting imperialism, nationalism and ethnocentrism, Marechera's interest is in personal rather than group identities. His narcissistic reflections have, in the past, been sharply rebuked by nationalist criticism. Musa Zimunya laments that: "The artist curries favours and succumbs to the European temptation in a most slatternly exhibition", hoping that "the naïveté and narcissism will wither and the African will become less European" (1982: 128). This, I think, is a fundamental misunderstanding of Marechera's project. His engagement with Europe and European forms, dramatically highlighted by the interracial sexuality trope, is never a simple and naïve yielding to "temptation". However, his cross-cultural hybridisations will always be controversial, not least because they destabilise, to a great extent, the structures of domination and submission assumed by both colonialism and nationalism. What is frequently overlooked by straightforward nationalist criticism is that narcissism

⁶⁰ A Fanonian analysis could certainly be applied to the current crisis in Zimbabwe. As already stated, the discursive structures of the interracial sex taboo, of black peril and of a nationalist desire for retribution can be detected in President Mugabe's use of metaphor in his political speeches regarding the current land conflict.

has a potent politics of its own: this can prove, as Marechera demonstrates, an effective strategy in the battle against *internalised* racism.

Marechera is also unsettling to nationalism because, through the trope of interracial sexuality, he unhinges the notion of discrete racial identities. However, this again could be considered effective liberation strategy. Edward Said states, “What Fanon and Césaire required of their own partisans, even during the heat of the struggle, was to abandon fixed ideas of settled identity and culturally authorised definition” (Said 1989: 223, cited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. 1999: 260). This is a view Marechera might support, though I hesitate to align him with any particular political project.

This chapter has suggested the strong influence of Fanon on Marechera’s psychoanalytic outlook. This is not, however, to suggest, that either is infallible in their perceptions. As Fuss states:

Unfortunately, Fanon does not think beyond the presuppositions of colonial discourse to examine how colonial domination itself works partially through the social institutionalization of misogyny and homophobia. Fanon’s otherwise powerful critique of the scene of colonial representation does not fundamentally question the many sexualized determinations of that scene (1999: 317).

While this may be true of Fanon, Marechera does indeed gesture towards a fundamental questioning of sexualised determinations of the colonial and post-colonial scene in his destabilisation of heteronormativity, unprecedented in Zimbabwean literature (a point I will argue in Chapter Three). Despite her gendered criticisms, Fuss also states, however, “What Fanon gives us, in the end, is a politics that does not oppose the psychical but fundamentally presupposes it” (1999: 322). This is enormously enabling. Following Fanon, Marechera takes the psychical to the centre of debate in Zimbabwean literary, cultural and current political studies. This chapter has shown that he does so in large part through his unabashed treatment of taboo interracial sexualities.

Bhabha’s conclusions on Fanon are also relevant to Marechera:

....in seeing the phobic image of the Negro, the native, the colonized, deeply woven into the psychic pattern of the west, [Fanon] offers the master and slave a

deeper reflection of their interpositions, as well as the hope of a difficult, even dangerous freedom: “It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (Fanon). (Bhabha 1986: xxiv).

Marechera’s rigorous self-reflexivity and innovative interventions in the space between the mask and the identity make him a hugely significant figure in the imagining of alternative identities, relationships and dynamics, beyond the current deterministic structures.

CHAPTER TWO:
ANTI-PATRIARCHAL WOMEN'S WRITING: MARECHERA'S DIALOGUE
WITH AN EMERGENT FEMINISM

But the young woman's life is not at all an easy one; the black young woman's. She is bombarded daily by a TV network that assumes that black women are not only ugly but also they do not exist unless they take in laundry, scrub lavatories, polish staircases, and drudge around in a nanny's uniform. She is mugged every day by magazines that pressure her into buying European beauty; and the advice columns have such nuggets like 'Understanding is the best thing in the world, therefore be more cheerful when he comes home looking like thunder.' And the only time the *Herald* mentions her is when she has – as in 1896/7 – led an uprising against the State and been safely cheered by the firing squad or when she is caught for the umpteenth time soliciting in Vice Mile.

Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger* (1978: 50)

...[T]he gender question is always second to the national question. Therefore, I think, it hasn't received proper attention nor the right kind of analysis. One reason for this is that women in Zimbabwe are very wary of being called feminists. It is a really dirty word.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, interviewed by Kirsten Holst-Petersen (1993: 347)

If speaking is too difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction. The written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation of world, its proposals, its individual characters, its suspension of disbelief.

Yvonne Vera, *Opening Spaces* (1999: 3)

In *House of Hunger*, Marechera exposes the structures that subordinate women under colonial patriarchy in anticipation of the arrival of modern black feminist writing in post-independence Zimbabwe. He does so ten years before Tsitsi Dangarembga's groundbreaking *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and fourteen years before Yvonne Vera's

foray into a feminine/feminist aesthetics with her first collection of short stories, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992).⁶¹

That Marechera, a male writer, should be a progenitor of feminist literature in Zimbabwe is something of a paradox in view of the apparent misogyny for which he has been condemned. While the passage above from *House of Hunger* seems progressively sympathetic to feminism, it is undercut by a seemingly contradictory comment about the narrator contracting VD from a prostitute: "The experience left me with an irreverent disgust for women which has never left me" (1978: 3). Marechera's fictional persona criticises gender inequality and champions the rights of women on the one hand, only to slip back, apparently, into a misogynistic, phallocentric outlook on the other. In fact he is a rather awkward forbear for feminism. Yet I maintain his significance is too important to ignore.

I do not wish to argue that Marechera *is* a feminist writer. In fact it would be difficult if not impossible to classify him as such. This chapter will assert, however, that he *fundamentally* problematises the ideology of patriarchy (alongside the other ideologies such as capitalism, colonialism, traditionalism, Christianity, and nationalism, with which it has been enmeshed), that he is the first black Zimbabwean author to do so, and that the manner in which he does this is pertinent to feminism.

I point out Marechera's place in Zimbabwean literature as a catalyst for modern feminism not to diminish the remarkable achievements of women's writing, but to set him alongside this burgeoning body of literature and make the case for dialogue - a dialogue which could benefit studies of Zimbabwean literature as well as the expansion of feminist discourse. This is one humble step in that process. As yet there is almost no detailed criticism exploring this link.

From the outset it needs stating that the universalist assumptions of much Western feminist theory are under critical scrutiny in African contexts. Amina Mama expresses the need for divergence from certain strands of feminism popular in the West. For example:

⁶¹ Stanley Nyamfukudza, also a highly significant commentator on gender and sexuality, launches a subtler critique of patriarchy shortly after Marechera, beginning with *The Non-believer's Journey* (1980). *If God Was a Woman* (1991) is his most provocative and pro women's emancipation text.

Within radical feminist discourse, gender is regarded as the most fundamental social division, and men are viewed as being inherently and irredeemably aggressive. In keeping with this view, radical feminists treat women as if they were a single homogenous group, devoid of class and racial inequalities, reduced to mere instances of male power (2001: 263).

Mama's reservations are shared by many other black feminists and womanists, who also express the need to counter eurocentrism.⁶² Dangarembga echoes this critique, regarding Zimbabwe. Observing the failure of imported women's liberation models, she states in interview that:

western feminism was so alien to the thinking of many black women, because it did come from a foreign culture, that they were not even able to assimilate it to an extent where it would give them that initial liberation which was necessary as something to start building on (George and Scott 1993: 315-316).

She expresses the need for "refashioning theories" and thinks, in general, "that theory has to become much more wide and particularly within the women's movement it has to really broaden its reach" (316). In this initial study, I suggest an engagement with Marechera (and with several other neglected women writers) could broaden the terms of the debate within the women's movement, within Zimbabwean literature, and within the modern Zimbabwean cultural context.

There are some key points of Marecheran significance that I wish to highlight now, and which I will further argue at other junctures in this chapter. Firstly, he refuses categorisation. In this sense he can be likened to Calixte Beyela, the controversial francophone feminist. As Sonja Darlington observes:

⁶² "Womanism simultaneously seeks to revise and to retain African traditions" states Aegerter (2000: 67). Tuzyline Jita Allan (1995) describes womanism as non-eurocentric, woman-centred, and embracing the notion of a common humanity. I do not wish to enter the somewhat fraught debate between feminism and womanism here, but to recognise conflicting opinions. Rosemary Moyana, a Zimbabwean academic, argues, with Toril Moi, for her "distinction between 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Moyana 1994: 25). She disagrees with Nagueyalti Warren's classification of "Dangarembga as a 'womanist' writer (as opposed to feminist), committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female" and states that "By 'womanist' I believe Warren is placing *Nervous Conditions* closer to the *female* tradition," whereas in fact "the novel goes beyond that level" (26).

Beyela reviles classification, a methodology from which ideological determinism benefits most and a labeling system that eludes the grasp of women and children. This is a system that makes children and women objects rather than subjects. As social and political groups, women and children have not had control over *who* has the power to classify, *why* they can classify, and *how* they classify (2003: 42).

To refuse classification, as Beyela does, is to raise disruptive questions, to destabilise patriarchal ideology and thereby diminish its power.

Patriarchy, for the purposes of this thesis, is defined as the system of male domination - culturally, socially and legally maintained - prevailing in an African-specific context. Distinguishing features in Zimbabwe are the customary practices of lobola (bride price) and polygamy, and also the widely held view that female sexuality ought to remain in the domain of family and community structures (traditionally important to the continuance of lineages). It was not until the Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982 that black women achieved the right to own property, and to control their own sexuality. Prior to this, a girl/woman's legal guardian had the capacity to sue for seduction damages in the event of unsanctioned sexual liaisons, and resultant pregnancies (ZHR Report 2001: 5). Marechera, significantly, writes much of his anti-patriarchal critique in *The House of Hunger*, *Black Sunlight* and *The Black Insider* prior to the passage of LAMA.

In unsettling a dichotomous notion of womanhood, I will argue, Marechera's writing to a great extent resists the ideological determinism of patriarchy. Having said that, it may still be criticised for a phallocentrism and a gendered determinism of its own; but one does not necessarily need to dispense with feminist critiques of Marechera in order to acknowledge the potential usefulness of his perceptions and subversive strategies for feminism. Despite the misogyny and phallocentrism discernible in his work, he is important to feminism precisely because of the difficulty he presents – the fact that he problematises both patriarchal and anti-patriarchal discourses.

Marechera's second major point of significance is that more so than any other Zimbabwean author, he claims space for *the individual* to express her/his voice – in *uncompromising* detachment from externally imposed roles and rules. These include

gender roles and rules. He has significantly inspired other writers (as has been noted in Chapter One), including women, for this reason. Pauline Ada Uwakweh credits Tsitsi Dangarembga with a somewhat similar achievement:

the self-referential nature of the autobiographical mode adopted by Dangarembga as a literary strategy marks her attainment of voice in the Zimbabwean male-dominated literary arena. Voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims the individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action (1995: 75).

She, like Marechera, has appealed to readers, especially the marginalised and disempowered, because she claims space for a dissenting individual voice.⁶³

The two authors make an illuminating point of comparison: Dangarembga, who met Marechera, comments, “I could identify with him very much because of the conditions which brought him to what he was,” but “it was difficult to relate to him as a person. There are so few people who are writers and nothing else – ... that made him so isolated and self-conscious” (Veit-Wild 1989: 107-8). This is discernible in his writing style, which is more radically introspective than Dangarembga’s. *Nervous Conditions* is written in the first person from the perspective of an implied author, Tambudzai, but Dangarembga holds onto a distinction between author and narrator, between fact and fiction, that is completely blurred with Marechera.⁶⁴ As she suggests, Marechera’s life was his writing and his writing was his life.

By this I do not mean to argue that the author and narrator can be simply equated. However, Marechera inserts *himself* into fiction more radically than any other Zimbabwean author (even Vera, who can also be considered a postmodern experimentalist, retains a much clearer distinction between author and narrator). We might say he creates or reinvents himself as an entity inside the fiction. As Taitz and Levin state, “the self at the center of the autobiography is not a stable and fixed category. Identity is constructed and formed in the process of writing” (1999: 164).

⁶³ In interview, she noted her first novel’s profound effect on young girls: “They call me up on the telephone, you know, just to talk to me” (George and Scott 1993: 312).

⁶⁴ Asked in interviews how autobiographical her work is, Dangarembga has repeatedly declined a direct response. She told Veit-Wild “I find it a very difficult question to answer” (1989: 101-8) and Marangoly George and Scott “It is a very complicated question” (1993: 318).

Self-exploration, self-invention and self-empowerment are all components of this genre, all of which can be seen as of a form of self-assertion for the marginalised and oppressed.

Marechera demonstrates at an early stage in Zimbabwean literature the potential of writing as a liberating practice for *the individual*. The implications for questions of gender are profound. If identity is recognised as a constructed fiction, then the individual subject, through fiction, can re-imagine and re-create her identity and imagine a new reality – in the world of fiction at least. In this sense it becomes possible, through writing, to transcend or transgress one's station in society - the role for which one is cast at birth by patriarchal society. In her preface to the *Opening Spaces* anthology of women's writing, Vera states "writing has created a free space for most women" (1999: 3). Women writers, I suggest, may find to this extent that their interests coincide, despite the misogynist elements in his writing, with Marechera's, in exploring the possibilities of fictional space.

Another major significance of Marechera is his exposure of the ideological machinery of patriarchy, and his interrogation of its psychological mechanisms. In the society Marechera describes in *House of Hunger*, the violence against black women - "bombarded by a TV network" and "mugged...by magazines," newspapers and other implements of the mass media - is not only physical but also psychological (Marechera 1978: 50). The tentacles of patriarchal ideology extend their reach to the individual's psyche. This is another crucial point that Marechera brings to bear at an early stage in black Zimbabwean literature as he lays bare the framework of what Althusser would term the 'communications ISA' - the mass media (in service of racial patriarchy), which attempts to shape black female identity. Marechera highlights both subtle and crude forms of patriarchal oppression and the manner in which they operate. He provides one of the first critiques of the violence performed on the mind by patriarchal structures; and through fiction he attempts to unhinge the individual from the determining power of ISAs.

In doing so, however, Marechera demonstrates that patriarchy is never a simple mechanism. Rather, he discerns its complicated intersections with economic and other determinants: he recognises, for example, the overlap with capitalism and cultural imperialism in his critique of "magazines that pressure [the black woman] into buying

European beauty” (1978: 50). There is an increasing awareness of these complications in Zimbabwean women’s writing.

In *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (1985), a pioneering landmark in Zimbabwean feminist criticism, Rudo Gaidzanwa, recognising the ideological character of writing (1985: 87), draws attention to problematic literary representations of women in Shona, Ndebele and English texts up until 1985. She highlights the fact that female characters have largely been drawn according to stereotypes in the patriarchal imagination, claiming that for women, “A negative image delegitimises their struggle for fundamental rights and freedoms” (8).⁶⁵ Along with several other Zimbabwean writers and critics, Gaidzanwa argues that images can either fix or transform perceptions. They “reflect the values and norms held by the image makers,” but they “are not immutable and it is up to writers and people who contest the images to redefine them in ways that they deem to be more realistic, constructive and liberating to the society in question” (Gaidzanwa 1985: 99). In other words, images of women in literature represent a significant site of struggle.

Marechera apparently sympathises with this view in his sharp critique of the communications ISA, under the control of the Smith regime, which “assumes that black women are not only ugly but also they do not exist unless they take in laundry...and drudge around in a nanny’s uniform” (1978: 50). Literature can reproduce or counteract problematic images but Marechera’s writing, as I will demonstrate, also asks: What constitutes and who defines positive and negative images? He ruffles standard literary image production, but realism is not his aim, and it is not immediately obvious that his subversive imagery, although disruptive, is necessarily as “constructive and liberating” as Gaidzanwa would hope.

⁶⁵ Although ‘images of women’ criticism has slipped into relative obscurity in the Western academy, I suggest the construction and deconstruction of images is far from irrelevant to current concerns in Zimbabwean literature.

Here there is a link, in terms of strategy, with Vera who, in women's literature, has effected the most radical redeployment of images. In an interview with Jane Bryce she comments:

When I'm writing - for example, when I was writing *Without a Name* (published 1994) - I start with a moment - visual, mental - that I can see, and I place it on my table, as though it were a photograph. In *Without a Name*, I had this 'photograph' or series of photographs, of a woman throwing a child on her back. This photograph is a very familiar scene in Africa. If you walk down the street you'll see it - a certain style and movement, a certain familiarity. And this moment came to me, how it's done: the child is thrown over the left shoulder onto the mother's back, she pulls the legs around her waist. Then I change it in one aspect: that the child is dead. But the mother performs the same action. So I take this series of images, and I put them on my desk, so to speak, as I write. This moment, frozen like that, is so powerful that I can't lose sight of it, visually or emotionally. From it I develop the whole story, the whole novel: how do we get to this moment when the mother does this? Everything ripples around that, the story grows out of the image. I don't even have the story at the beginning, I have only this cataclysmic moment, this shocking, painful moment, at once familiar and horrifying because of one change of detail which makes everything else tragic. For me, an entire history is contained in such a moment (Bryce 2002b: 219).

In *Without a Name*, a novel about rape, infanticide and war, Vera shockingly defamiliarises the familiar, eliciting complicated responses of sympathy and outrage at the same time. Both Vera and Marechera are adept in the art of iconoclasm and contradiction and, with both authors, images of women are often disturbingly inconsistent with standard ideas and ideals. Vera's re-adaptation and redeployment of images of women follows a trend set in Zimbabwean literature by Marechera. In an interview with John Vekris, Vera agreed that she "shares with the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera a daring approach to subject, bold uses of language, a symbolic

style, and willingness to use the surreal” (Vekris 1997).⁶⁶

In this chapter, a context, an exposé and an analysis of various anti-patriarchal styles, strategies and problematics in Zimbabwean women’s writing, will be offered, accompanied by a marking of some possible points of comparison and dialogue with Marechera. I will argue that in its struggle to break free from the deterministic, masculinist, moralistic prescriptions of Rhodesian Literature Bureau-styled writing, where it had its origins, black women’s writing has tended to fall between nationalist and socialist realist tropes. Both, however, limit the possibilities of exploration and innovation. Here Marechera’s transgressive aesthetic is significant in that it offers a route out of this impasse, yet it is also often problematic for its misogynist and phallogentric features.

It is important to recognise the specific social, historical, political and discursive context of the literature I will discuss. As we saw in Chapter One, the issue of black and white peril was crucial to understanding the meaning of Lessing’s and Marechera’s transgressive texts on interracial sexuality in their Zimbabwean context. Equally, the context of black women’s marginalisation and disempowerment is relevant to an analysis of the following texts, which comprise an emergent feminist aesthetic and provoke feminist discussion in Zimbabwean literature.

⁶⁶ There have been many suggestions, though few detailed analyses as yet, of a postmodernist experimentalism she shares in common with Marechera. See Kizita Muchemwa (2002). Ranka Primorac notes that “The designations ‘lyrical’ and ‘poetic’, often bestowed on her texts, sometimes function as euphemisms for stylistic and compositional opacity, and Vera is, indeed, the most ‘difficult’ anglophone writer to emerge from Zimbabwe since the death of Dambudzo Marechera” (2001: 77). I could have, of course, chosen to focus on Vera’s significance, not Marechera’s, to an emergent feminist aesthetic, but her work and its implications are already much discussed and fruitfully so. Marechera’s, on questions of gender, is not, and there is a risk that valuable insights, predating Vera’s, could be lost to the discourse if they are not now acknowledged and pursued.

1. Socio-Historical and Discursive Contexts

Feminism holds a negative stigma in Zimbabwe where “women are petrified at having that label thrown at them” states Tsitsi Dangarembga (George and Scott 1993: 316). Perhaps for this reason, feminist organisations have struggled until recently to mobilise women. There are signs, however, that this is changing. The establishment of the Women’s Coalition and the adoption in 2000 of the Women’s Charter marks the unmistakable arrival of a newly energised anti-patriarchal movement in the political arena. This represents the culmination of women’s frustrations after many years of being silenced or side-tracked by empty promises. The charter, which is reprinted in the Zimbabwe Human Rights (Non-Governmental Organisation) report on gender issues “articulates women’s demands for formal legal equality” and “challenges the roots of women’s subordination”, while also rejecting “male power and control manifested in [domestic] violence, bride payments and the control of female sexuality” and all forms of rape, including marital rape (ZHR Report 2001: 14). “Criticising our own ‘culture’ is politically as well as culturally sensitive,” states the Charter, “But without such criticism, women are unlikely to achieve equality with men in our society” (14). The Women’s Coalition “successfully urged women to vote against ... proposals in the referendum” of February 2000 for a new constitution because “in some respects [they] actually weakened existing protections” and smacked of “past male strategies of giving symbolic rights that had little substance in practice” (12).

The public is becoming increasingly exposed to dissenting female voices. When Sheba Phiri-Dube of the Zimbabwe League of Women in Politics (ZLWP) “blamed tradition as a hindrance to gender equality, and relegating women to second class citizenship”, it was reported in *The Daily News*:

....[C]ultural values remain largely prohibiting factors to the actual realisation of gender equality...Women do not compete for public office or leadership positions because of cultural barriers which suggest that public leadership is a man's domain (*Daily News*, 16 October, 2000).

Some argue the situation has worsened in recent years. In the fifth parliament of 2001 there were only fourteen women MPs as opposed to twenty-one in the previous parliament (ZHR Report 2001: 17).

On the face of it, the ruling ZANU party, which assumed power under Robert Mugabe in 1980, began with a progressive gender policy promising equality “in all spheres of political, economic, cultural and family life” (2001: 5). But women have been disappointed by the government’s failure, as yet, to deliver on these promises. The government promised “to employ women in at least 30% of all managerial positions in the public service,” but in 1999 only two women were among 23 permanent secretaries to ministries in the civil service. In the judiciary, only six of 24 High Court judges are currently women...No women serve on the Supreme Court bench,” and “As of 2001, Zimbabwe’s seven [state-controlled] universities had only one female pro-vice-chancellor and not even one female professor” (17). Regarding the two major parties, the current Politburo of ZANU-PF – which holds real power - is almost exclusively male; and “only one fifth of the MDC’s first elected executive were women despite its goal of one-third” (18).

It is important to recognise that the story of gender inequality in Zimbabwe is one bound up in the history of racial inequality. Customary Law often specifically focused on the subordination of black women and it was devised by rural African patriarchs in collaboration with male colonial authorities. Hausman states: "In order to serve their interests, colonial officials searched for Shona customs that would promote their agenda - male control over female sexuality" (1998: 33). Elizabeth Schmidt argues "Indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control reinforced and transformed one another, evolving into new structures and forms of domination" (1992: 1-2). It is problematic to assume the current subordination of black women is simply derivative of indigenous African tradition (NGO Forum 2001: 5). During the ninety-year period of colonial rule black women lost an enormous amount of previously held status, ranging from land rights to custody over their children (Hausman 1998: 29-30, 51). This was mostly the result of colonialism, which entrenched the subordination of black women to serve the needs of colonial patriarchy and European capitalism (Schmidt 1996: 86-92). While suffering a loss of status under colonial rule, black women were also barred from the benefits of western education. One can understand the appeal of the nationalist liberation struggle, which promised to redress such inequalities.

Black Zimbabwean liberation movements waged an armed struggle against the colonial settler state to reclaim land and redress racial inequality. There was to be a

revolutionary restructuring of society, which appealed to the many women who took part. However, “Most were sidelined into refugee camps. Some acted as couriers and porters. Many were abused,” the ZHR NGO Report states, and “As in most ‘revolutions’, the issue of gender inequality was regarded as less pressing than other inequalities” (2001: 4). Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi has recently challenged the premise that there was ever a commitment to gender equality, despite the fact this was stated as a goal by the main liberation movement. “During the War,” she states, “ZANU and ZANLA mythologised their support for gender equality,” and afterwards “writers used their official propaganda to argue that women had emerged from Zimbabwe’s war significantly emancipated” (2000: 1).

Nhongo-Simbanegavi is sharply critical of well-meaning academics who have, she alleges, performed a naïve disservice to Zimbabwean women: “With the new government, a legend developed about the role of African women in the liberation war. The ZANU PF regime propagated this myth in collaboration with feminist scholars” (2001: xix). At the Congress of ZANU Women held in Mozambique in May 1979, towards the end of the war, “the ZANU leadership professed to bury patriarchy,” and proclaimed a new status for women (xix). But “Gender reforms were never on the movement’s practical agenda” (xxi). “The marginalisation of women in post-war structures mirrored all the vices of the war period” (97). The Department of Women’s Affairs in ZANLA was never democratically structured. Its leaders, claims Nhongo-Simbanegavi (Teurai Ropa, Sally Mugabe and Juliet Zvobo), were catapulted into prestigious positions by virtue of their marriages to powerful men - not because they held grassroots support (2000: 51).

The liberation movement seemed to promote gender equality and *The Zimbabwe News*, its internationally-circulated publication in the 1970s, was impressive to western women’s groups, NGOs and foreign donors. But Nhongo Simbanegavi claims ZANLA’s women’s programme was gesture politics. The impressive image of male and female ‘comrades in arms’ on the battleground was exploited for its propagandistic capital but it belied the reality. Norma Kriger, whose research is also critical of liberation struggle mythology, and predates Nhongo Simbanegavi’s unprecedented access to the ZANLA archives, agrees that “although women often fought side by side

with men, most male guerrillas did not accept gender equality in practice” (1992: 194).⁶⁷

Reputable scholarship now goes as far as to claim black women were betrayed by the nationalist liberation movement, which led them to believe they would achieve gender equality. This never happened and debates continue as to whether the leadership of ZANLA and ZANU were ever genuinely committed to that ideal.⁶⁸ However, shortly after independence, it seemed the new government was making a good start. Before independence black women were considered perpetual minors under customary law and, by default, the law of the colonial state. The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982 was welcomed by women’s groups as a milestone in the journey towards gender equality under the law. It gave full legal capacity to both sexes at age eighteen and “gave women the right to own property as well as control over their sexuality by vesting in each woman (rather than, as previously, in her legal guardian) the capacity to sue for seduction damages” (ZHR Report 2001: 5).

But gender equality was not written into the Zimbabwean constitution until 1996, and even then, customary, family and personal law were exempted. “Thus our Constitution itself permits, even encourages, men to discriminate against women in innumerable ways, provided these are recognised ‘customs’, or fall within the ambit of family or personal law,” states the ZHR report (2001: 5). Blatant legal discrimination against women is still on the statutes and remains an issue for resolution in the re-drafting of a new constitution.

Shortly after independence the government also proposed to abolish *lobola* (bridewealth), the price paid to the bride's family in exchange for her hand in marriage, which has been widely criticised by feminism as exploitative of women.

⁶⁷ The standard version of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle is now a matter for critical scrutiny. “Martin and Johnson’s *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: the Chimurenga War* [1981], provided an unambiguously heroic narrative that was incorporated into school text books” comments S. Robins (1996: 76). This official narrative, despite being problematic, went unchallenged until the 1990s. In his critique of the “more than willing scribes of a celebratory African nationalist history that profoundly shaped official accounts of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle” (76), Robins interrogates “academic silences on violence and coercion during and after the Zimbabwean liberation struggle” (75). At issue is the genocide that occurred in Matabeleland in the early 1980s, ignored at the time in the “praise texts” of scholars and justified by the ZANU (PF) government as simply a mop-up operation against dissidents, in the nation’s best interests.

⁶⁸ Less research exists regarding ZIPRA, a rival faction of the liberation movement, but ZANLA’s gender policy has generally been considered the more progressive.

Although traditionally it was meant to cement bonds between families, nowadays the institution holds few advantages for women. The government's promise never materialised, however. Elder men complained that the proposed abolition interfered with their ability to control daughters and wives: therefore the government backed down, re-defined *lobola* as "part of the patriarchal heritage" and condemned "feminism" as a "new form of cultural imperialism" (Phillips 2001: 11).

The ruling party's supposedly pro-women's liberation agenda, derived from promises made during the war, now apparently went into reverse mode. This was a defining moment for the stigmatisation of feminism, which became marked as 'western' and anathema to official culture in the 1980s. The discursive structures that produced 'black peril' in the early twentieth century – namely a desire for cultural purity and racial hygiene – permutated in Zimbabwean cultural nationalism to produce the concept of 'feminist peril', a threat of cultural contamination from the West. Accordingly, an anti-feminist gender policy became problematically enmeshed in the new male-dominated ideology of cultural nationalism.

It is mostly arguments for the maintenance of 'traditional culture' and Customary Law that have marked feminism as 'unAfrican', yet ironically both of these can themselves be considered, in large part, a product of colonialist manipulation.

The ZHR report, reserving its right to criticise traditional culture, argues that,

Gender discrimination ... starts with the assumption that girls will get married and their major work will be to produce children for their husband's families. Their obligation to bear children for their in-laws arises from the payment of bridewealth (roora, lobolo) by husbands to their wives' fathers, brothers, or guardians (2001: 13).

Traditionally, however, "The ideology of bridewealth says it is *not* an indemnity payment for a woman's labour or fecundity," which, in modern masculinist culture, is now a popular view, "but rather expresses gratitude to her family for raising her properly and binds the two families in an ongoing relationship" (13). Domestic violence is often justified by citing women's obligations and duties. However, the report adds that "traditionally its payment did *not* give husbands the right to beat their wives, whose

own families had the obligation as well as the right to protect their daughters against marital abuse” (13).⁶⁹ Popular masculinist interpretations of traditional culture, which inform public policy, have not taken cognisance of these factors.

Polygamy has prevailed in rural areas in large part because, historically, it increased a family’s capacity for reproduction, which in turn improved its social and economic status. This institution has not specifically been singled out for criticism by the women’s charter but it falls within the ambit of gender discrimination (since women are not permitted the same right).

Despite its pro-women’s liberation promises made during the war, the ruling party – in government since independence, has a record of repression. Women frequently suffer abuse in Zimbabwean society: they are afforded little legitimacy unless they are married. Single women are often presumed by the dominant order to be devious. This was the case during ‘Operation Clean-up’ in 1982, when women purported to be prostitutes were suddenly rounded up by police on the streets of Harare ahead of a Non Aligned Movement Conference in the capital. Gaidzanwa recalls:

Women were required to produce certificates of marriage or proof of such if they wanted to be released. Women from all walks of life were subjected to this infringement of their freedom of movement, speech, association and redress simply because unmarried women were viewed as prostitutes (1985: 96).

Lawrence Vambe, describing a similar event in 1984, states “This incident reveals that despite waging a war in which women participated as equals, Zimbabwean law makers and enforcers still operated from the assumption that women are dirty, loose and dangerous” (Vambe 2002: 1).

‘Operation Clean-up’ was not a new phenomenon: it recalls events of the 1930s when there were a series of round-ups of single women in mining and urban areas of the colonial state. Then, the test of legitimacy of black women was also a marriage

⁶⁹ Historically, marriage and lobola performed several important functions in traditional Shona society – not always to the disadvantage of women. See Schmidt (1992: 23-27) and Hausmann (1998: 24-25).

certificate. A letter by a concerned gentleman to the Native Commissioner, received in 1937, quoted by Theresa Barnes, shows the same anxieties about 'loose morals' and 'social disease':

Men and women are too loose – it seems all are now loose living. Those who attend Church are better off than those who do not go to church... There must be a bill of parliament to chase these girls and women from the Mines and the town location to stop the loose morals and the spreading of the disease. Then the country will be better; it is the only way to make the country better” Salomon Makeba. (Barnes 1999: 96-7).

Mr Makeba's sentiments are not unlike those held by late nineteenth century social and moral hygienists in Britain, who also agitated for a clampdown on prostitutes in the interests of maintaining an uncontaminated society.⁷⁰ This quote neatly illustrates the confluence of Christian, colonial, and patriarchal African concerns in the 'Unholy Alliance' against independent black women. A complex combination of hostile forces has, historically, worked against the emancipation of black women.

In the current context of male-dominated cultural nationalism, and initiatives ostensibly to purge Zimbabwean culture of 'foreign influences', misogynistic attitudes “on numerous occasions during the 1990's led mobs of men to strip women naked in the street for wearing mini-skirts that were 'too short'” states Phillips, and “the harassment of women was justified with their denunciation as prostitutes or *mahure*, a word frequently used to describe women who display economic independence, or particularly a sexual autonomy” (2001: 11). This demonstrates how independent women, feminists and prostitutes have become interchangeable terms in the by now familiar discourse of social, moral, cultural and racial hygiene. The term 'Operation Clean-up' evinces their representation in this discourse as sites of contagion.

There is widespread violence against women in Zimbabwean society but it does not always recognise itself as misogyny. Marechera writes in *The House of Hunger* that “[the older generation] still believed that if one did not beat up one's wife it meant that one did not love her at all” (1978: 50). This practice is still prevalent in Zimbabwe.

⁷⁰ Judith Walkowitz comments insightfully on this issue in *Prostitution and Victorian Society – Women, class and the state* (1980).

“According to Justice Elizabeth Gwaunza, a former High Court judge who specialises in family law..., one in four women is beaten, raped or molested by her male partner and one in 25 women is assaulted while pregnant” (ZHR NGO Forum Report 2001: 16). As Marechera’s comments suggest, such violence is often socially condoned in as an ‘act of love’ – expected behaviour from men. Dangarembga sharply criticises this attitude in *She No Longer Weeps*, as we will shortly see.

A problematic attitude persists regarding rape as well. Rape is still not fully understood and prosecuted as a serious offence against the woman, who is the victim, herself. Phillips notes that :

Both African Customary and Roman-Dutch laws around rape are derived from the laws prohibiting the abduction of another man’s woman, and so are constructed from the original objective of protecting women as property, rather than protecting their autonomous bodily integrity (2001: 11).

Also, under Zimbabwean law, women are prohibited from seeking an abortion, except in cases of proven rape or life-threatening illness. This may explain the high incidence of ‘baby-dumping’ – women abandoning their newborns in apparently desperate circumstances. Many women die as a result of failed illegal abortions or else during childbirth, or from AIDS. Most women do not have proper access to education, healthcare and contraception; and many do not feel they have the right to say no to unprotected sex with husbands or other men who may be infected with the HIV virus. If they carry condoms, women are often accused of being *mahure* (prostitutes).

Education promises a route out of patriarchal subordination and the provision of free and compulsory schooling for both girls and boys after 1980 raised hopes. However, as Mama states (based on 1991 research) “the proportion of women gaining access to education has actually fallen, and this is most pronounced in the field of higher education” (2001: 261). The number of black girls attending school has dropped even further in recent years. With the declining economic situation, many families are unable to afford school fees. When they can afford fees, boys rather than girls are sent to school as a priority. (This is of course is a major theme in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*.) Without education women will be less well equipped to achieve self-empowerment.

Although women have also sought to regain lost status with regard to land ownership and tenure, it seems, despite current government promises, that they remain severely disadvantaged. Beginning in 2000, the Mugabe government launched its controversial 'fast track' land redistribution initiative. However, "The Woman and Land Lobby group have shown that land occupations and redistributions have not benefitted women at all" notes Terence Ranger (quoted in Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000: xvii). Nhongo-Simbanegavi states:

Violent clashes have taken place on occupied farms, as in urban areas, where partisan struggles are becoming the order of the day...there have been news reports of women being raped and beaten up, and of young girls being molested. In many instances the alleged perpetrators of these crimes seem to think they are acting in the interests of the nation. As women have often been subjected to such indignities by men who have claimed to be defending Zimbabwe's nationhood, the question is: what is the gender of that nationhood? (153).⁷¹

Although, as Dangarembga comments, "the gender question is always second to the national question" (Holst Petersen 1993: 347), there is growing awareness that the two are in fact inseparable.

In summary, the landmark Women's Charter is clear evidence of an emergent anti-patriarchal consciousness and a feminist politics. However, the story of women's struggle for emancipation in Zimbabwe has often been one of frustration and betrayal. This would indicate that women's liberation is not straightforward or easily achieved; and it underscores the need for an adaptive feminist discourse to meet the challenges presented by a complex set of conditions. Central to the issue of women's liberation is the question of sexuality; or, more specifically, who controls it. Feminists, prostitutes and independent women have been depicted as one and the same and stigmatised as enemies of the State and the patriarchal status quo because they represent a disruption to customary practices. The assertion of an *individual* female identity, entailing the control of one's own sexuality, is a subversive statement in the cultural context of Zimbabwe.

⁷¹ Also see Schmidt (1992: 26) regarding traditional Shona belief systems relating women to the land.

2. The Birth and Development of Black Women's Literature

There are signs of a vibrant and diverse body of black women's writing emerging in Zimbabwe, though as yet critical discourse has tended to narrow its focus to the discussion of only one or two of the most celebrated writers, who are the most recognisably feminist - usually Dangarembga and Vera. While these authors are certainly worthy of attention for their carefully-crafted and provocative writing, nevertheless a range of lesser-known women writers deserve critical engagement in the interest of widening the canon of Zimbabwean literature and of recognising a diversity of women's writing style and perspectives. This can only contribute to the much-needed expansion and development of literary and feminist critical discourse.

The context of this literature is important and extraordinary. In his *Introduction to Zimbabwean Literature* Zhuwarara observes, "it is the male authors who dominate the literary discourse in pre-independence Zimbabwe" (2001: 235). In her social history of the literature, Veit-Wild notes, "It is not easy for a Westerner to imagine what courage and strength it takes for an African woman to defy male prejudices and arrogance and write books" (1987: 172). A few women writers emerged despite the hardships, however: Jane Chifamba published Shona folk tales in 1964 and Lassie Nondo published the first Ndebele novel in 1962. But it was not until the 1970s, according to Veit-Wild, that women "seem particularly sensitive to the precarious nature of a changing African society," and begin to "openly express their concern about the place and role of the woman in this process of transformation" (Veit-Wild 1993: 246). This literature can be seen as marking the beginnings of a feminist consciousness. Stella Mandebvu published *Ndochema Naani?*, a novel in Shona in 1974 and "Joyce Simango's novel *Zviuya zviru mberi* ("Good things are ahead") (1974) is a fervent appeal against the custom of pledging daughters" (Veit-Wild 1993: 247). Barbara Makhalisa wrote two Ndebele novels and one play in the 1970s before penning *The Underdog and Other Stories* (1984) after independence and in English. In these stories, as Veit-Wild observes, Makhalisa "seems to have radicalised her views" "depicting the harsh realities of women's victimisation in male society" (248). Her *Eva's Song* collection of short stories (1996) continues the same project. Also significant in the 1980s are Irene Mahamba's novella *Woman in Struggle* (1984), Betha Msora's play, *I will wait* (1984), Freedom Nyamubaya's *On the Road Again* anthology (1986), and Kritina Rungano's poems in *A Storm is Brewing* (1984) and *ALOISA* (1988).

Dangarembga published her controversial, radically feminist play, *She No Longer Weeps*, in 1987 and the acclaimed *Nervous Conditions* a year later. In 1990 the Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW) organisation was established. Its anthologies of poetry and short stories (1994 and 1998) represent women from across the broad strata of Zimbabwean society. Nozipo Maraire's novel *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter* (1996) attracted attention for its sensitive woman-centred style. However, Vera's prolific literary output is now considered the centre-piece of Zimbabwean women's writing: "*Nehanda* (1993) signalled the presence in Zimbabwe of a new and remarkable writer and her four subsequent novels have confirmed that she is the most important African novelist to have emerged during the 1990s," state Robert Muponde and Mandy Turuvunga, editors of *Sign and Taboo*, a volume of critical essays on the author (2002: book cover blurb). In *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002), Vera has profoundly challenged the masculine bias in Zimbabwean literature with a feminine/feminist poetics.

Significant new Zimbabwean writers are Chiedza Musengezi, whose short story *Crocodile Tails* (1999) explores female identity and a bond between a young Zimbabwean schoolgirl and her expatriate teacher, and Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, whose *Deciduous Gazettes* (1999) irreverently lampoons lingering patriarchal customs in Hararean high society in the 1990s. Another noteworthy publication is Virginia Phiri's *Desperate* (2002), a semi-fictional collection of narratives, sympathetic to "women [who] take to prostitution as the last resort" (Phiri 2002: iv).

My analysis will address a selection of the Anglophone texts listed above, but a background to the peculiarities of the Zimbabwean publishing industry is a necessary starting point. It seems a cruel irony that although Zimbabwe produced, in Lessing, in the 1950s, as Agate Nesaule comments, "a crucial novelist whom any good feminist critic needs to confront" (1985: 70), it did not produce a major black feminist writer (Dangarembga) until the 1980s. There has been almost no dialogue in Zimbabwean literature, until recently, between white feminist and black feminist writing. Complex historical divisions account for the problematical schism.⁷²

⁷² Women's narratives such as those collected by Madeline Heald in *Down Memory Lane with Some Early Rhodesian Women, 1897-1923* (1979), though pro-women's emancipation by implication, do not demonstrate an identification with the struggle of black women. They do little to bridge the racial rift in society.

Black women, historically, have been marginalised, censored and misrepresented by a male-dominated publishing industry. Gaidzanwa explains that before independence “The Rhodesia Literature Bureau had a monopoly of vernacular publishing and it pushed the simplistic, moralistic novels that did not differ markedly in style or form” (1985: 91).⁷³ It discouraged the type of experimental, critically-minded writing that may have resulted in the development of a feminine/feminist aesthetics. This carefully monitored body of literature effectively worked in tandem with the colonial ideology. As Gaidzanwa comments, “The colonial order is accepted as given and unproblematic. This is so because those writers who were critical or who problematised the colonial order never got published at best, or got harassed and detained at worst” (1985: 95). One had to accept and reproduce a distorted construction of reality in order to get published, thereby effectively normalising a racist status quo: there was little room for subversive literary practice.

Moralising Christian and African traditionalist narratives, in keeping with colonial social policy, therefore became the unquestioned standard. Gaidzanwa observes:

In most of the vernacular novels, the aim is to strongly point a moral and to punish those women who transgress the rules of decent behaviour for women who are wives and mothers. Some of these erring women die painful, ghastly deaths... Others are sentenced to death... There are no cases where women get away with adultery, promiscuity or disobedience without incurring drastic punishment (87).

In juxtaposition, patriarchal ideals of the ‘good’ wife and mother were cherished. This was true of most vernacular fiction, both male and female, before 1980. Veit-Wild notes that “The few women who started writing at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies ... were strongly influenced by the Literature Bureau’s prescriptions” (1987: 174). This precedent was firmly established as the standard; and it was the only published literature that told the story of black women.

It was not until the comparative relaxation of publishing proscriptions after independence that black women writers were able to begin deconstructing stereotypes.

⁷³ See also Mungoshi’s comments in Veit-Wild (1993: 247).

Before then, Dangarembga recalls an inability to ‘insert herself’ into fiction because there was no “cognitive map” for young black Zimbabwean girls, as there is for Western girls in, for example classic novels such as *Jane Eyre*:

this was something that was denied to us, absolutely and completely...[t]he Literature Bureau would only allow tales of traditional witchcraft, wives poisoning their husbands, you know, that kind of thing...that was the only cognitive map that the forces in power then were allowing us to construct (George and Scott 1993: 312).

Problematic writing models, according to Dangarembga, have lingered into the post-independence era: in terms of form and style, “the actual technique of writing has been imposed” (313), and this is a legacy she and other women writers have had to grapple with.

Although it departed significantly from racial stereotyping, in the 1980s the Zimbabwean publishing industry tended to retain what had been established as the standard with regard to gender, while also developing male-dominated biases of its own. For example, *Nervous Conditions* (now internationally acclaimed and on school and university syllabi throughout the world) was initially rejected by a Zimbabwean publisher. According to Veit-Wild this was because “The pointedly feminist perspective was apparently off-putting to the editor concerned” (1993: 331). Dangarembga herself states that: “It seems to be very difficult for men to accept the things that women writers want to write about: and the men are the publishers” (311).

In the important and related medium of film, to which Dangarembga has transferred, it seems the same marginalising patterns persist. “African women film-makers are being denied access to funding and are failing to tell personal stories through their own productions,” states Maxwell Sibanda in *The Daily News*:

One of [Dangarembga’s] productions which is failing to get funding is about a black woman who goes overseas and desires to have a child with a white man. The woman conceives but unfortunately gives birth to a black child. The second one is about the liberation struggle (26 November 1999: 19).

Dangarembga suggests that a range of new women-centred images, themes and perspectives are still being blocked in their quest to enter Zimbabwe's male-dominated cultural domain.⁷⁴

To return more specifically to literature, however, the factors outlined above have overdetermined the style of writing and the representation of women, setting problematic precedents, curtailing experimentation with form, and discouraging the breakthrough of new feminist perspectives. Although Dangarembga and Vera have demonstrated exciting new possibilities, women's writing nevertheless bears cumbersome burdens of the past. It has become a site of celebration, disillusionment, protest, and vision, addressing the issues outlined above, articulating anti-patriarchal sentiments, and pursuing the quest for women's emancipation. But it differs considerably from author to author, regarding how this might best be achieved – as the following texts will attest.

⁷⁴ Now, however, because of the political and economic crisis there has been a collapse in the publishing industry. "Nothing is happening," stated Tsitsi Dangarembga on 21 October, 2003 at a "Daughters of Africa" reading and discussion. This is yet another strange twist of fate in the history of Zimbabwean literature. In fact, Dangarembga claims women writers may now even have an advantage over their male counterparts in that the Zimbabwe Women Writers collective, unlike most publishing houses, has managed to keep afloat: "the men have nothing."

3. The Chimurenga Model: nationalist liberation and women's literature

The armed struggle for independence from colonial rule in the 1970s - gave rise to a huge output of creative literature in the 1980s, almost entirely written by men.⁷⁵ Women's voices have steadily filtered into the war narrative, significantly altering the story and challenging its masculinist biases. These texts, although neglected in mainstream criticism, are important to an understanding of the development of anti-patriarchal writing trends in women's literature.

A significant exception to the male-dominated output in the mid-1980s is Irene Ropa Rinopfuka Mahamba's novella, *Woman in Struggle* (1984), which enthusiastically imagines the emancipation of its main female character during the guerrilla war. It exemplifies and celebrates the Chimurenga ideal in women's liberation literature. The armed struggle against colonial rule promised gender liberation; and in this novella Mahamba takes the revolutionary liberators up on their word.

Nyevenutsai, the young protagonist, is rescued from the unwanted fate of an arranged marriage when she meets freedom fighters and discovers: "The struggle for the liberation of Zimbabwe stands for the eradication of all forms of injustice and oppression and it is only through its triumph that the oppression of women would be uprooted" (1984: 8). Although this is announced didactically as a maxim, the reader quickly discovers its flaws.

The predicament of Mahamba's heroine, briefly, is as follows:

A month after my [late] aunt had been 'brought back' into the home, my aunt Rowsai, a second cousin of my father, came to tell me that soon I would leave for [uncle] Nyandurai's place. This was in fulfilment of the custom of '*Chimutsa Mapfihwa*'. My aunt had only lived with her husband for four years. She had only had two children. She therefore had not done enough to cover what had been paid as 'lobola' by her husband. I, being the only daughter of her only

⁷⁵ These narratives typically dichotomise issues and celebrate the ultimate victory of Zimbabwean nationalism over Rhodesian colonialism. The most outstanding exception to the trend is Stanley Nyamfukudza's *The Non-Believer's Journey* (1980), which presented a critical, highly sceptical portrayal of the struggle. Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*, (1989) another account of struggles within the struggle and profound disillusionment afterwards, began a trend of dissent from the official celebratory narrative.

brother, was the one and only candidate for replacement. So I was to be led to the sacrificial altar...(Mahamba 1984: 8).

Revolted by Nyandurai, who enters her hut one night to announce he is sleeping with her, Nyevenutsai takes flight on a journey of self-liberation by joining the ZANLA forces. When the guerrillas later visit the village, Comrade Dzvoo, instructing in the modern ideology of the revolution, overrules the old patriarch, telling Nyandurai that Nyevenutsai is free to marry who she chooses:

Let's not forget that things do not stay in one place. They change and develop. In the olden days we used hoes for ploughing, today we use ploughs. The hoes were okay for that time but not today. Some of our traditions no longer work today. Why do we no longer kill twins or children whose upper teeth come out first? Was that not part of our tradition? In the same way, it no longer works for us to oppress women to force them to marry men they do not like or force them in any way (27).

Understandably, the gender ideology of the liberation movement, as represented in this novel is attractive to Nyevenutsai: it promises to overturn oppressive patriarchal traditions. But is Comrade Dzvoo's drive towards a new socialist model of modernity really so progressive for women? Prostitutes apparently have no place in the utopia envisaged. Their profession is considered a capitalist vice to be eradicated and other women (of 'virtue') are called upon to assist in the project. One prostitute is castigated by the freedom fighters and the community. So as to appear even-handed though, Comrade Ripai – the man who metes out justice - subsequently declares that "Those who took part in the shameful relationship with her must also be dealt with" (39). A public beating session of the culprits ensues.

Policing the boundaries of sexual behaviour in this manner raises serious questions for the cause of women's liberation. Why is it still men who devise and enforce the rules (and through violence)? And why is one image of womanhood, 'the Whore', still reviled in this new, supposedly forward-looking gender ideology? To simply equate prostitution with immorality and capitalist corruption shows a worrying adherence to newly oppressive edicts. *Woman in Struggle*, in its veneration of certain ideals of

womanhood and degradation of others creates problems as well as solutions for the cause of women's liberation.

Also, Nhongo-Simbanegavi disputes the book's representation of wartime reality: "Most women's experiences were less romantic," she states: "They did not always enter voluntarily into war-time relationships with men" (2000: 9). Mahamba's novella aspires to a type of socialist realism, originating in the Soviet Union, which was officially encouraged at the time.⁷⁶ According to Régis Robin, socialist realism means "to depict reality in its revolutionary development [Zhdenaov]": it "places at the heart of its preoccupations the struggle of the proletariat, the new man" (1992: 59-60). Within this appealing 'revolutionary' form, Mahamba's places Nyuvenentsai, a 'new woman', at the heart of social change. Her novella is a noble intervention on behalf of oppressed women but flawed largely due to an over-enthusiastic, uncritical embrace of struggle ideology, along with its in-built male-dominated elements. It problematically legitimises a new 'revolutionary socialism' that, despite its egalitarian pretensions, still retains a patriarchalist hegemony.

Freedom Nyamubaya's anthology of poetry, *On the Road Again* (1986), is less romantic, and more hard-hitting with its socialist realism. Zimbabwe Publishing House promotes these aspects of her book:

Comrade Freedom's poetry is so easy to follow, and yet it is full of remarkable experiences which she sincerely shares with the reader. She writes about war and peace, pain and suffering, despair and hope with a sense of involvement which tells the reader that the poet has been there, struggling with her people (Nyamubaya 1986: Book cover blurb).

In the revolutionary sense, this is poetry about the people and for the people. Nyamubaya, who fought on the frontline for ZANLA during the war, sees writing as a means of continuing the struggle for freedom, her namesake, and she makes full use of military metaphors in her verse:

⁷⁶ See Ngara and Chung (1985), government educationists, who advocate the form.

Introduction

Now that I have put my gun down
For almost obvious reasons
The enemy still is here invisible
My barrel has no definite target

now

Let my hands work –
My mouth sing –
My pencil write –
About the same things my bullet
aimed at.

(1986: 1)

As the book's title and another poem indicate, Nyamubaya's journey towards freedom is far from over: she is "on the road again", still fighting for the people with her poetry. For critics of her simple style, she has a simple answer:

Poetry

One person said
you are not a poet,
but forgot that,
poetry is an art and –
Art is meaningful rhythm
...
Then let's agree to disagree
Art serves.

(2)

Hers is a confrontational, functional view of poetry because, as she states, "People die in the ghettos" and "Workers suffocate under coal mines" (2). Nyamubaya styles her poetry according to the guidelines of socialist realism. But if art simply "serves", is the artist or poet primarily a servant of the people? Marechera raises such questions in *Mindblast* (1984), where he satirises the socialist revolutionary movement in literature:

There was this talk of forming poetry co-operatives. You get these guys together – preferably excombatants – and you each contributed a word or a phrase to the poem. You published it in the name of the co-operative. In the same way you formed short story drama co-operatives...

That was poetry with production.

Not Buddy's nihilistic individualism which some said was merely a manifestation of capitalistic thought. They said every poem is political: everything written is political. So which side are you on, comrade? Is yours poetry with the people; or poetry against the people? (Marechera 1984: 62)

With Buddy, Marechera makes the case for a modern aestheticism versus a didactic socialist realism. Marechera's caricature is perhaps unfairly applied to Nyamubaya.

Significantly, however, Nyamubaya's collection of poems was published by ZPH in the same year Marechera's were rejected: an opportunity was missed by ZPH to broaden the type of literature being circulated at the time, and with it discussion. This might have been achieved to an extent by juxtaposing Marechera's unorthodox, anti-realist poetry (whose controversial images of women I will later address) with the officially sanctioned socialist realism of writers such as Mahamba and Nyamubaya.

In fact Nyamubaya's poetry is not as simplistic as it may first appear and its adaptation of socialist realism does not neatly fit Marechera's description by any means. She composes a damning indictment of the post-independence dispensation, with more subtlety, with regard to gender:

A Mysterious Marriage

Once upon a time
There was a boy and girl
Forced to leave their home
By armed robbers.
The boy was Independence
The girl was Freedom.
While fighting back, they got married.

After the big war they went back home.

Everybody prepared for the wedding.
Drinks and food abounded,
Even the disabled felt able.
The whole village gathered waiting
Freedom and Independence
Were more popular than Jesus.
Independence came
But Freedom was not there.
An old woman saw Freedom's shadow passing,
Walking through the crowd, Freedom to the gate.
All the same, they celebrated for Independence.

Independence is now a senior bachelor
Some people still talk about him
Many others take no notice
A lot still say it was a fake marriage.
You can't be a husband without a wife.
Fruitless and barren Independence staggers to old age,
Since her shadow, Freedom, hasn't come (13).

Because Nyamubaya's poetry recognises a neo-colonial betrayal, it refuses to celebrate the 'revolution' for women in the same manner as Mahamba's earlier novella. Using her wartime name, (Comrade) Freedom, she writes herself and her disillusionment into the narrative of Zimbabwe in a gesture that also draws attention to the male-dominated bias of standard liberation literature. Freedom is figured as a woman throughout the poem and Independence as a man, but only until the last stanza when he becomes "Fruitless and barren", still looking for "*her* shadow, Freedom".⁷⁷ By reassigning Independence's gender, Freedom (the poet) emasculates and feminises him, apparently in protest at his charade: "You can't be a husband without a wife." The parable-teller speaks on behalf of the absent Freedom, symbolic of women generally, and the freedom that failed to materialise for them. In this poem, Nyamubaya scorns the male-dominated charade of

⁷⁷ The subject of the last two lines, which can be read as a sentence separated by a comma, is Independence. The possessive pronoun, according to standard rules of syntax, refers to the subject. This may be an error, a misprint, or a deliberately subversive strategy to create gender ambiguity. I read it as the latter.

independence without freedom, moving into allegorical mode to express her disenchantment.

“A Mysterious Marriage” is unflinching in its critique of women’s continued marginalisation in the early years of Zimbabwe’s independence. The sentiments of this forgotten wartime heroine, turned poet, strike a chord with a later publication which also focuses on women who have become invisible in the liberation struggle narrative.

Irene Staunton’s edited collection of thirty personal narratives, *Mothers of the Revolution* (1990), derived from interviews conducted by herself, Elizabeth Ndebele and Margaret Zingani, is a tribute to forgotten women in the struggle for Zimbabwe’s liberation, many of whom are unable to read or write. The collection attempts to transcribe oral testimony into written text; and Staunton explains the importance of the project in her introduction:

These women, the mothers, were both victims and actors. Throughout the war, over and over again, they fed and protected the freedom fighters and they risked their lives to do so. This they know and it is a fact of which they are proud. “The men were around, but they only used to say, ‘Hurry up [with the food] before the soldiers come and beat you up!’” (Staunton 1990: ix).

An underlying premise in the book is that “Without the women, the war could not have been won” (xii). Victory, they were told at the time, depended much upon the efficiency of their ‘cooking spoons’. *Mothers of the Revolution* celebrates their important role, acknowledges their hardships, and indirectly criticises their continued post-independence poverty and marginalisation.

But, as Caroline Rooney points out, the book retains a certain mythologisation of motherhood, produced by the liberation struggle. She highlights a “gap between myth or ideology and reality with regard to the position of mothers” that goes undetected and unproblematised in Staunton’s presentation (Rooney 1991: 58). On the one hand Rooney notes the “desire by the women for recognition and legitimation of their value,” and yet it is also true, in contradiction, that some of the same women take part in

programmes “for the re-education of women into their proper places” (60). Meggi Zingani explains her job as a district chairwoman:

to teach women proper ways of behaving, good manners: to know their place and position in the home. Some women do not understand what independence means. They think that they should rule others and their husbands. We also encourage women to work hard to help maintain their families...the village and district committees were formed to teach people, especially mothers, to behave like mothers (Staunton 1990: 134).

This evinces motherhood as an ideological practice, confirming Elleke Boehmer’s point that “a national ideology privileging mother symbols did not in reality empower mothers” (1992: 242). In this case, on the contrary, it obliges them to a role of perpetual servitude, which is then venerated as patriotic.

Of *Mothers and the Revolution* Rooney argues “the book serves to promote somewhat uncritically two related images of women, of ‘the mothers’: the endlessly hard-working women; and the strong enduring woman” (1991: 62). The danger is that “such images may be used against women, as myths to justify doing nothing for them, or to encourage them to go on working for nothing as supposed volunteers” (62). The male-dominated nationalist narrative of liberation, with its subordinating ideology of womanhood, Rooney shows, continues to determine the production of images of women in a debilitating manner, not always immediately discernible. Despite the efforts of women’s literature to re-present and re-deploy ‘positive’ images of women using the apparently enabling frame of the ‘revolution’, some of these images can work counterproductively against women’s liberation. This will be relevant to a re-reading of Marechera’s misunderstood representations of womanhood.

A highly significant development in 1990 was the setting up of the Zimbabwe Women Writers (ZWW) collective, a non-profit organisation. This has functioned since its inception to counteract the marginalisation of women in the production and publication of literature. Writing workshops have been organised throughout the country and anthologies of poetry and short stories have been published in English (in 1994 and

1998) as well as in Shona and Ndebele (in 1994/5). According to Tawona Mtshiya, National Chairperson in 1994:

The objectives of Zimbabwe Women Writers are:

1. To promote women's writing in Zimbabwe
2. To develop women's writing skills
3. To encourage the reading of women's writing
4. To promote the publication of women's writing
5. To promote literacy among women
6. To promote positive images of women in writing

(ZWW 1994: v)

These are commendable objectives. However, a question for the ZWW posed by Rooney's observations, as well as Marechera's (and Vera's) writing, is what constitutes positive images and who decides on this?

One significant genre represented, and appropriated by women in the ZWW anthologies is the poetry of protest and struggle. It builds on an already established tradition in Zimbabwean literature, best exemplified by the anthology *And Now the Poets Speak: Poems inspired by the struggle for Zimbabwe* (Kahhane and Zimunya 1982). The following extract from a poem by Forbes T.K. Karimakhwenda, typifies the form:

WE (1978)

We the people
Discriminated 'gainst
Humiliated
Disunited
Slave-paid
Abused
Confused
Used

...

(Kadhane and Zimunya 1982: 40)

The anti-colonial sentiments are clear in this poem. In “Chains”, by Chiramwiwa Lato, the genre is adapted to protest male domination:

I cannot escape
I am bound by the chains of wedlock
And chains of tradition are the bolts
No matter how I try
I cannot escape
....
One day I will break these chains
One day I will be free
Free from all the false promises
And hope.

(ZWW 1994: 223-224)

Both Karikamwenda and Lato use images of slavery or “chains” to describe the subordination they experience, though one speaks of racial domination and the other of gender domination. In “Chains” the speaker calls attention to her imprisonment by social structures that have trapped her in an unhappy marriage. However, there is also a note of defiant hope, an earnest desire to overcome. In fact, writing about her plight in itself demonstrates an act of self-empowerment. So too does Karikamwenda’s anti-colonial poem, despite its bleak tone. The purpose of protest poetry such as the above is to register resistance to oppression.

Some of it is more militant in style and characterised by images of armed struggle. “Fight On!” by Barbara Makhalisa’s is exemplary, as this extract indicates:

...
Take up arms and wage war
Let your spear be education
Let your shield be knowledge
Let 'Truth at all times' be your motto
Let your will be the determination to work hard
For sisters illiterate still abound
Fight it to enlighten them

Fight it by solidarity of purpose
The nation cannot develop
Without your participation.
...
(ZWW 1994: 73-74)

The metaphors of war and fighting - traditionally masculine pursuits - are re-appropriated here for the purposes of women's emancipation. The poem is a rallying call for collective action against male domination.

It also demonstrates a reversal of the motifs that characterise traditional Shona praise poetry. As J.C. Pongweni explains, "The praise poem is basically an effusion of flattery recited as reward for socially commendable acts" (1996: xi). Anti-praise poetry is an adaptation of this form popularised during anti-colonial struggles: instead of praising the master or chief, one criticises his abuse of power. Poems inspired by the struggle for Zimbabwe's liberation can often, though not always, be read as inversions of the praise poem ideal.

But the gender dimension of traditional praise poetry is relevant here. As Darren East notes, "Southern African society is notoriously patriarchal," and "there is almost no tradition of women poets, as the praise-poets were exclusively male" (2000: 11). Moreover, sometimes "women are either excluded or not allowed to speak" (11). Therefore, the very act of women speaking out in these poems can be considered revolutionary.

Makhalisa's poem goes further than that though. Her militarised vocabulary reappropriates the standard metaphors of traditional courtship poetry: the usual assumptions are that: "In conquering her," Pongweni explains "the man has seized, and the woman has lost the initiative" (1996: 105). Makhalisa has reversed this concept: the women in her poem refuse to be conquered and are instead taking the initiative in an offensive of their own. This counteracts what Pongweni terms the "violent chauvinism" (105) in traditional love poetry, where women have been required to memorise and recite praise poetry to thereby affirm male domination as an unassailable ideology. "We doubt if, in such a male-dominated dispensation," states Pongweni, "the woman had an opportunity to say how she felt she should be praised for, first, her courage in

capitulating to the man's proposal," or for "agreeing to having him 'pierce, break through' her virginity, before she carries his child for nine months" (1996: 106). The terms of traditional praise poetry discourse, in existing accounts, are quite insistently and unreflexively masculinist.

It seems there was little or no space in the praise poetry tradition for women to reject the concept of male domination altogether, which is what the ZWW poets, quite radically, are doing. In one example of the form, Pongweni cites "The love poem for the *Shumba Mhazi* man (*mandanha omugudza*)" which is to be recited by the woman to her husband (121). Translated into English it reads:

Hail, Lion!

The Destroyer!

Thank you, Supreme Beast

You selected me, a grain from chaff,

The way the cockerel picks from the rubbish dump.

Tell me, when you push me to the limit,

When you tingle the marrow in my bones,

Making me gallop like a young ox,

How do you suppose I can clap to applaud you?

...(122)

In the recitation of this poem, and others like it, the woman is required to express deep gratitude to the leading man for the privilege of serving his sexual needs. Although Pongweni does not note the potential for heavy irony, or indeed sarcasm, in the recitation of this poem, this would be an obvious route of women's resistance.

It is perhaps not surprising in view of traditional masculinist sexual domination, that sexual autonomy and reproductive rights should be a focus of attention in many of the anti-praise poems by women. This is the main theme of Bianca Mahulune's "Claim our Rights":

Give us our rights
We are the mothers
of tomorrow's leaders -
Not baby-producing machines.
Give us our rights!

We are up long before dawn
Toiling in the fields
But benefit nothing-
Just feeding our babies

Women, let's stand up
And show them
We can build a nation!
Let's show them
We can claim our future!

Let's demonstrate now
That we women
Will claim our rights!

(ZWW 1994: 165)

“Claim our Rights” hybridises the Chimurenga struggle poetry form with an anti-praise poetry, anti-male domination retort. It also, somewhat problematically, builds its case for rights by recourse to problematical nationalist images of virtuous womanhood: “We are the mothers/ of tomorrow’s leaders” and “We are up before dawn / Toiling in the fields”.

Given its context, women’s anti-praise poetry is more subversive than may seem at first apparent to a Western reader, and the genre presents a challenge to critics to develop the appropriate tools of analysis. “This poetry contains a lot of slogans,” says East, of South African anti-praise poetry, and “What imagery there is, is so obvious as to be almost hackneyed...It is this moral certainty, the absolute distinction between the good...and the bad, that makes [the poetry] ...dull to read. ...And yet, it was extremely popular”

(East 2000: 6). A similar description applies to the poetry considered here. Nadine Gordimer explains popular literature in 1980s South Africa particularly well, and this may also apply, to a certain extent, to similar writing by women in Zimbabwe:

To those who look for an intensely transformed experience in reading poetry, not experience as poetry, generalised doggerel put together out of slogans stirs little response. But People's Literature, it can be argued, is not for the reader who is looking for experience intensified by the writer; it is for those whose own experience exceeds the intensity of words. Therefore the most banal of verbal symbols will set off identification. People's Literature is not meant so much to enlarge the reader's understanding beyond his familiar world, as to concentrate his understanding of the worth and dignity of that world (Gordimer 1990: 38).

Marechera's view of these genres - people's literature and 'revolutionary poetry' - is predictably critical. Asked by Flora Veit-Wild what he thought of the "revolutionary poetry" genre, the anthology *And Now the Poets Speak*, Marechera commented:

There you find the struggle with the feeling, if one has suffered, that the statement of one's suffering must necessarily be poetic. Now that is not so. The extent to which one has suffered through political oppression is not necessarily the substance of a poem. You also find a kind of crisis of utterings, you find the poems hovering uneasily between trying at the same time to be public poems and to be private poems... ([Veit-]Wild 1988: 135).

Anti-patriarchal struggle poetry since the 1990s (written after Marechera's death) is somewhat different in purpose and tenor from the above. Nevertheless the connections are also clear: in its statements of suffering, its stark oppositions and its sense of political purpose it greatly resembles revolutionary or anti-colonial protest poetry. Marechera's description of a "crisis of utterings" is relevant to much of this poetry, which is as much about a struggle to find one's own voice as it is about a struggle against a system. Wresting control over one's sexuality away from deterministic patriarchal structures is crucial to this process, yet the poetry contained in the ZWW volumes is as yet hesitant to fully, independently, explore feminine sexuality in a personal voice. This would of course be considered perverse and shocking in the Zimbabwean context.

The route to women's emancipation is still, predominantly, viewed as part and parcel of the nationalist liberation struggle. By stressing this connection in artistic production, progressives have sought to gradually transform male domination in cultural perceptions. A notable example is Ingrid Sinclair's groundbreaking film, *Flame*, which held the attention of the nation and the international independent film community in the mid-1990s. It addresses gender inequality and discrimination and the armed struggle. The screenplay is fictional but "behind their stories lies a universal theme that women everywhere recognise", Sinclair explains: "the fight for independence, and then the isolation and disregard and suppression that follows" (*ZimMedia* 2003).

Flame follows the lives of two women who joined the ZANLA forces, and chronicles the plight of female liberators returning to a life of oppression after the war – echoing a familiar theme in Nyamubaya's poetry. One of them is raped by an authority figure at a Mozambique training camp - a scene that caused a furore while still in production. On the instigation of the powerful male-dominated War Veterans Association, police seized negatives of the film "after allegations," the state-owned *Herald* reported "that it contained subversive information and some of its parts were pornographic" (13 January 1996). The War Veterans strongly protested Sinclair's right to present images of the struggle not endorsed by their organisation. Bowing to intense pressure, Sinclair had to censor the notorious rape scene so as to minimise its shock value and its negative critique of some wartime elements. When Florence (Flame) is raped by Che (a camp authority) there are a few shaky camera movements to indicate something untoward is happening, accompanied by a glimpse of a scuffle, before the scene fades to black. Then the victim leaves her rapist's bedside the following morning. In this manner, the serious issue of rape is glossed over in a compromise Sinclair admits was necessary in order to get the film released in Zimbabwe.⁷⁸ The compromise worked inasmuch as *Flame* achieved clearance from the authorities and broke all box office records as the most popular film ever produced in Zimbabwe. The story of *Flame's* making, the threats of state censorship, admissions of self-censorship and its hostile reception in some quarters indicate the extent to which narratives of national liberation are still regarded as patented property by influential male-dominated organisations, wielding considerable power, and the apparent necessity, however painful, to make concessions in certain situations.

⁷⁸ Sinclair admitted this during discussion of the film at the "Gender and Colonialism Conference" held at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa in January, 1997.

A different problematic is the apparent perception, now, of *Flame* as the definitive version of Zimbabwean women and the liberation struggle. The result is that Dangarembga, who offers a different perspective, cannot get funding: “Every time I submit this production donors tell me that they have already funded *Flame*” (*The Daily News* 26 November 1999: 19).

Since Mahamba’s *Woman in Struggle*, there have been a number of attempts in literature to rewrite the story of the liberation struggle from women’s perspectives. Writing within the Chimurenga model presents an opportunity for women to counteract male domination through the insertion of women’s voices into this popular and influential genre. But the Chimurenga model also presents pitfalls, primarily because it tends to dichotomise. In its classic formulation, nationalist struggle is pitted against colonialism; black against white. In its adaptation by the above women writers, women are pitted against men. On the whole it is a literature of few nuances and many stark oppositions; it is thematically and structurally somewhat monolithic. Struggles within the struggle are not well accommodated by the genre. Disturbingly, ‘virtuous’ women are often pitted against ‘corrupt’ women. In the case of Sinclair’s *Flame*, which manages to unsettle some of the dichotomies, a costly compromise with the official male-dominated narrative nevertheless proves necessary. Another problematic feature of the literature is its inbuilt masculinist bias: warfare, albeit symbolic, is assumed to be necessary; faith in the transformative power of force is an underlying premise; and military themes and metaphors abound. The literature as a whole raises several questions: What is the cost of operating within the male-dominated Chimurenga model in order to advance the cause of women’s liberation? Are the above concessions to a male-dominated liberation ideology inevitable and always necessary? Phrased differently, in the process of appropriating the Chimurenga model, how much is gained versus how much is lost for the cause of women’s emancipation? There are no quick, short answers to these questions. But they are worth asking in critical analysis of the literature because they highlight its shortcomings and the need for carefully considered interventions in the narrative of the liberation struggle. To date, Vera is the most significant author to have developed an alternative feminine/feminist account of the national narrative, as I will now demonstrate.

4. Vera and Myth-Making: writing women back into the national narrative

Mbuya Nehanda, a female spirit medium credited with inspiring the first and second chimurengas against the white settlers, is “a larger than life figure,” according to Zhuwarara, “a living legend often cited by freedom fighters” in many Zimbabwean novels (2001: 227). “A powerful and prolific oral tradition grew up around her name,” explains David Lan, inspired by “her refusal to accept conversion to Christianity, her defiance on the scaffold and her prophecy that ‘my bones will rise’ to win back freedom from the Europeans” (1985: 6). The spirit-medium myths were central to ideas of liberation and national identity in Zimbabwe and remain so in literary and cultural fictions to this day. In view of the fact that the myth of Nehanda dramatically breaks submissive stereotypes of women, and was so important to the spiritual underpinning of the first and second chimurengas, one might assume she automatically represents a convincing case for women’s emancipation, but this has not been the case.⁷⁹

After independence the mythology of Nehanda continued to serve a political agenda, legitimating the new leadership: “Nehanda’s head and shoulders hovered above those of Robert Mugabe” on banners that symbolised the new nation, notes David Lan, as if to indicate “the warrior of the past guiding, supporting and recommending this triumphant warrior of the present” (1985: 218). Countless songs celebrated Nehanda’s leading role in the Chimurengas but despite her non-conformity to stereotypes of womanhood, she was stripped of possibly feminist interpretations and quickly domesticated by the new regime. The site of her commemoration, significantly, became the Ambuya Nehanda Maternity Hospital. A warrior and liberator of the past was now imaged as the grandmother and midwife of the new nation.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Nhongo Simbanegavi claims when female combatants of ZANLA were discovered to be sexually active, for example, they were told by their commanders “Nehanda died a virgin but you are doing the opposite” (2000: 73). Thus, in the ZANLA training camps the myth was frequently used to chastise women, to assert masculine control over feminine sexuality.

⁸⁰ The legend of Nehanda has various versions. In the nationalist version, the young woman Charwe, Nehanda’s medium during the 1896-7 rebellion, was a virtuous virgin until death. But in an original Nehanda myth, explained by Lan (1985: 76), she is obliged to have incestuous sex with her youngest brother, Nebedza, at the behest of their father Mutota, so that the descendants of this lineage can climb down the escarpment into the area now known as Dande. Lan observes: “The theme of incest is not uncommon in mythic narratives. Quite often it represents an action so powerfully condemned in ordinary life that when performed by the characters in the story, they are transformed and so is the society they are part of.” (1985: 81). Therefore an act of incest, an ultimate sexual transgression, is connected to the myth that has become so central to Zimbabwe’s idea of nationhood. And it is ironic that Nehanda has been idealised as a signifier of chastity and maternity in current cosmologies. If it is closely analysed, the myth of Nehanda, embodies several conflicting meanings. Its mobilisation in service of a political agenda has required the unreflexive celebration of certain aspects of the myth and the repression of others.

Thirteen years after Zimbabwe's attainment of independence, Vera realised, as she stated in an interview, that this heroine in the national imagination "had been disempowered in the sense that she had become an image and the actuality of her life had vanished" (Hunter 1998: 78). The author explains:

With *Nehanda*, I wanted to bring that woman who had led the first rebellion against the British to the forefront. I was conscious of the feminist elements there, and in fact it is a contemporary novel in terms of the issues. I wanted ordinary women in Zimbabwe to know there was nothing new in what they were attempting to do. At that time (early 80s), women were coming back from the armed struggle and people were not even recognizing that they had gone. But a women had led the first rebellion, not just physically but spiritually, which in fact was the basis of our entire armed struggle that followed – the Second Chimurenga.

...I had a fierce sense of responsibility to tell this story, and to do so, I had to co-exist with this Nehanda spirit. It really gave me a lot of strength as a woman (quoted by Bryce 2002b: 222).

Thus Vera attempts to re-assert Nehanda as a positive role-model, most specifically for Zimbabwean women. In doing so she faces the seemingly daunting task of revising the masculinist history of Zimbabwe's liberation struggles. Most significantly, the author demonstrates the extent to which it is possible to transform ideas of national literary through fiction. Terence Ranger, a well-known historian, notes her rather audacious "refusal to draw upon works of history or anthropology," yet comments, approvingly, that: "The wonderful symbolic details of Nehanda – more powerful and plausible than those recorded by anthropologists – sprang entirely from Vera's mind" (2002: 203).

Discussing her strategy, Vera states, "Myth kind of challenges history...There's therefore a need to mythologise history...It is forceful and liberating to use myth, which is, nevertheless, history" (quoted by Musandireve 1994: 20). As Malinowski explains:

myth acts as a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief, the function of

which is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events (Malinowski quoted in Brennan 1990: 45).

Realising this, Vera attempts to transform our understanding of the nation and its history through a women-centred lens. But she discovers Nehanda is an ambivalent figure, not easily appropriated to a progressive feminist project.

Vera's account follows the standard nationalist version of the myth in that it returns to pre-colonial Shona society in the 1890s, registers a disruption in cosmological harmony with the arrival of the white settlers, and details the resistance inspired by Nehanda, who leads the first Chimurenga uprising. But Vera transforms this into a women-centred story from the outset. From the moment of her supernatural birth, after which "she did not cry for a day" (1993: 12), Nehanda is surrounded by women who nurture her cosmic powers: "Following the directions of the spirits, the women buried parts of the umbilical cord in different places in the fields, spreading it as though to bless the earth with it" (12-13).

Vera further feminises the focus of her novel when the whole community gather around and become aware of a great female presence.

Nehanda's trembling voice reaches them as though coming from some distant past, some sacred territory in their imaginings...

The men stop dancing and kneel around Nehanda, and the women in the outer circle cast protective shadows over the bending bodies of the men (Vera 1993: 62)

The image of men kneeling in submission before a woman runs contrary to a more typical image in the present-day social order, in traditional communities, where patriarchal custom requires the opposite. The women casting "protective shadows over the bending bodies of the men" is also an inverse symbol, since men are usually imaged as the guardians of women. The phallocising of Nehanda in this image is however, problematical: "Nehanda can only achieve spiritual greatness when she is possessed by a male ancestral spirit!" states Vambe (2003). She commands authority, in other words, by becoming, spiritually at least, a 'man': "although Vera rightfully complains that

post-independence male writing in Zimbabwe has chosen to recall a ‘narrative that became patriarchal’, she has not succeeded in moving away from the male-dominated ideology of cultural nationalism” (Vambe 2002: 133). Also problematic, throughout the novel, is Nehanda’s continuous, uninterrupted spirit-possession. “This poses difficulties for African and western readers alike...When it is included in the novel, it can only be to serve some other ideological purposes” (Vambe 2002: 128).⁸¹ The purpose is a type of nationalist myth-making.

In this mode, Vera takes the reader back into the mists of time, conjuring the image of a supernatural world, and a higher reality:

The people clap their hands in unison, showing their submission to Nehanda’s spirit and truth. It has been a long wait. Now the truth is among them, and they succumb. The truth has reached them circuitously. It is not easy to see the truth when there is so much dust in the air (Vera 1993: 63).

This powerfully evokes an image of national communion in her novel; and allows her to re-enter and rework the crucial moment of consensus in the original nationalist myth. Brennan remarks that “nationalists [often] seek to place their own country in an ‘immemorial past’ where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned” (1990: 45). Although, to some extent, Vera succeeds in questioning the ‘immemorial past’, nevertheless, an image of a homogenised united African community remains (which, she strongly suggests, prefigures the modern independent Zimbabwean state). In his classic study of nationalism, Anderson comments that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may be prevailing in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” and “it is this fraternity that makes it possible...for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as to die for such limited imaginings” (1991: 7).

This ideology underpins the following scene, which posits an absence of gender and class inequality in this pre-colonial society – a sameness of mind and a unity of purpose that results in instant obedience to the edicts of a high priestess and commander-in-chief:

⁸¹ See also Chennells (1996: 13) and Ludicke (1997: 67):

Spread yourselves through the forest and fight till the stranger decides to leave. Let us fight till the battle is decided. Is death not better than this submission? There is no future till we have regained the lands of our birth...Raise your spears. Move into the mountains, I say. Worship your ancestors. Your ancestors shall protect you when you begin to release yourselves from this bondage (Vera 1993: 66-7).

This was the same message, approximately, of the second Chimurenga; and it is a classic episode, featured in several other texts, celebrating the spirit-medium myths - Solomon Mutswauro's *Feso* (1975), for example.

Arguably, by elevating a woman to such a prominent uncontested leadership role (more so than in most historical accounts) Vera confronts the stereotype of feminine passivity. But the image of a woman marshalling the troops during nationalist struggle does not necessarily equate with a transformed perception of Woman in the nationalist psyche. Boehmer (1992) addresses the problem in African nationalist fictions broadly, before the publication of Vera's *Nehanda*, but her observations are pertinent here: "Even if she is granted the part of single glorified heroine, she is seen as superhuman ('no normal woman could be this way') – once again removed from real life" (1992: 233). Although Vera tries, as she states in interview, to make *Nehanda* accessible and appealing to "ordinary women in Zimbabwe" (Bryce 2002b: 222), she nevertheless returns the figure to "the form of inviolable ideal or untouchable icon" – a problematic in male-dominated nationalist narratives (Boehmer 1992: 233). Vera does so inasmuch as she institutes a hierarchical division between a pronouncing and commanding priestess, constantly communing with the spirits, and the other 'ordinary' characters in the novel. Yet, somewhat inconsistently and unreflexively, a womanly egalitarianism is nevertheless asserted.

Nehanda heroically articulates nationalist aspirations in the face of colonial conquest, promising at the scaffold that, "My people will not rest in bondage" (117). She cries as, "She welcomes her departed, and the world of her ancestors" (118). In her death "The wind covers the earth with joyful celebration" (118). This is a neat closure, but there is a "cultural holism" assumed and asserted (Vambe 2002: 138).

So what is gained for the cause of women's emancipation through Vera's reclamation and acclamation of Nehanda and what is lost in the process of compromise with cultural nationalism? Vera's story celebrates Nehanda as a powerful female leader and role model, yet leaves key assumptions of the male-dominated cultural nationalist discourse intact, "those African values which are defined as unchanging" (Vambe 2002: 128). By reworking myth and revising history, Vera attempts to feminise nationalist ideology. However, in order to do so she accepts, and promotes in her novel the nationalist idea and ideal of "the deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991: 7).

According to Cynthia Enloe, nationalisms have "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (quoted in McClintock 1995: 355). With *Nehanda*, Vera has staked a claim for a feminist voice in the myth-making and writing of cultural fictions that always go hand in hand with nation-building. Her project, clearly, extends to a progressive transformation of the current social order, particularly for women, beginning in literary fiction/history. She tries to pry open a patriarchal nationalist narrative, previously sealed off to unorthodox reinterpretations, to unsettle some of its masculinist 'truths', and thereby destabilise fixed versions of national identity. But the ultimate success of her project, for feminism, remains a question for debate.

In her subsequent writing, Vera has continued a project of feminising masculinist tropes. Meg Samuelson has observed that her "four novels propose a corrective memory...The alternative mythology that they re-member reinserts the biological female body into a revised Shona cosmology, thereby offering women access to an ancestral past from which they have been excluded" (2002: 1).

After *Nehanda*, her first novel, Vera begins progressively to problematise the holism demanded of standard nationalist narratives:

Refusing to participate in a process of national amnesia that elevates one struggle (primarily waged by men) over another (primarily waged by women), Vera draws persistent attention to the fault-lines of national history. These fault-lines of gendered exclusions are often masked beneath idealized images of the great unifying mother who bespeaks national unity and wholeness. But Vera refuses to subscribe to this mystifying use of the maternal figure. She thus

replaces the earlier image of the women “pour[ing] milk to the ground” [in *Under the Tongue*] with that of them smashing mirrors, and the social imaginary of a ‘whole’ unified nation, in their own spectacular ritual (Samuelsen 2002a: 11).

Vera and Marechera

Vera is the most difficult and complex writer to emerge in Zimbabwean literature since Marechera. It is impossible, for reasons of space, to compare the two comprehensively but I will nevertheless state important similarities and differences. Recent literary criticism has begun to make links and draw comparisons. Kizito Muchemwa writes:

Yvonne Vera’s fiction, in its post-modernist thrust, shares many characteristics with Dambudzo Marechera’s writing in the fracturing of traditional narrative and narrative forms, the disordering and re-ordering of identities, the re-ordering of language to capture new experiences and the solipsism of narration (2002: 3).

Muchemwa observes Marechera writes within (or subverts, more accurately) a literary tradition, while Vera does not:

The style can be described as an amalgam of ‘lyrical method’, post-modern narrative techniques, and reconstructed orature. ...The defining strategy of this rediscovered and reconstituted discourse is the exclusion of the discourse of men (2002: 3).

However, Vera’s writing is nevertheless underpinned by an ideological investment, unlike Marechera’s, which is radically anti-ideology. Always irreverent, he immediately moves beyond the nationalist tropes which Vera still works within.

As a first novel, Vera’s *Nehanda* could not be more different than Marechera’s *House of Hunger*, in its treatment of history and mythology. In *House of Hunger* no-one from the past is seen as a hero or role-model. In fact Marechera parodies the very concept of heroism. He makes only fleeting, indirect, and irreverent reference to Nehanda, commenting on her fate, along with that of the black woman who is completely ignored by colonial society until she actively, visibly, resists oppression: “the only time the

Herald mentions her is when she has – as in 1896/7 – led an uprising against the State and been safely cheered by the firing squad or when she is caught for the umpteenth time soliciting in Vice Mile” (1978: 50). Three apparently inconsistent images flash past the reader in this sentence (as I indicate at the beginning of this chapter): the black woman arrested and killed for leading a protest, Nehanda who did the same in 1896-7, and the prostitute who is repeatedly arrested for “soliciting in Vice Mile”. The images are all rolled into one, and one might accuse Marechera, in his juxtapositionings, of an irreverent disrespect for Mbuya Nehanda (a virtuous virgin, according to the nationalist myth, and now grandmother to the nation). Marechera speaks of both heroine and whore in the same sentence, eliding distinctions, as though there were an equivalence.

Marechera’s treatment of the black male heroes of history is equally irreverent and controversial. Lampooning the Ndebele King, Lobengula, who was tricked into conceding the territory now known as Zimbabwe to Rhodes and the BSAC, and problematising celebratory nationalist revisions of history, Marechera’s narrator asks: “Where are the bloody heroes?” (1978: 43). Vera – having revised and feminised nationalist myth since Marechera’s death – might point to her reconstruction of Nehanda, though it is doubtful the debate would end there. *Nehanda*, clearly an ideological project, confirms Vera as a diligent nation-builder. This was a role Marechera, an intellectual anarchist, vehemently eschewed.

Whereas Vera engages with the national narrative, feminising it, and adding neglected women’s stories and women’s perspectives to it, with Marechera there are only parodic revisions of the national narrative. Myths are revisited and reinvented but not for the purpose of nation-building. In some sense, Vera strives to be a ‘useful citizen’ while Marechera does not (though he wears this as a badge of honour). Working within the system, she has posited an alternative, anti-patriarchal poetics. To this extent, Vera’s transgressions are conducted in a far more constructive, consistent manner. Unlike Vera, Marechera refuses to have any part in nation-building at all.

Both writers address Zimbabwe’s tragic, violent history, the backdrop to many personalised traumas. With controversial concepts of teleology, both authors break dramatically with logocentrism. For Vera, in *Under the Tongue*, a novel about incest and child abuse, which has a dream-like quality, “History had become dazed and circular” (1996: 112). For Marechera, on the other hand, history is “a psychological

condition in which we are constantly bombarded by unresolved and provisional images” (1987b: 110-111). These philosophies, needless to say, are incompatible with socialist realism, which was at one point officially advocated. Whereas Vera suggests historical discontinuity is temporary, momentarily “dazed” at this particular juncture, with Marechera, the relegation of linear teleology to the rubbish dump is more permanent.

Vera’s is mostly a backward glance, while Marechera’s is often non-specific in its temporality (for example *Black Sunlight*) as it comments on the present and anticipates the future. Significantly, given the political, economic and social crisis in Zimbabwe and the urgent need for a literature that addresses the post-independence dispensation, Vera’s only novel set after 1980 is *The Stone Virgins* (2002). This begins to address the recurrence of conflict and atrocity, despite idealistic pre-independence aspirations. The historical background is the ‘dissident’ war in Matabeleland in the early 1980s and government-sanctioned genocide. A tragic love story, it focuses on the close sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, who haplessly find themselves at the scene of an horrific, politically-motivated atrocity. Thenjiwe is raped and decapitated in front of her sister. Nonceba, whose lips are severed by the assailant, is rescued and rehabilitated by Thenjiwe’s lover, Cephas. For the first time in her fiction, Vera begins an indirect critique of the post-colonial state though she is careful not to point the finger of blame. Marechera’s critique, as we have seen, is much more candid.

In this novel and her other fiction, Vera explores psychic trauma, which involves a deep engagement with questions of sexuality: abortion, rape, incest, child-abuse, war-time atrocity. Violence, horror and abuse are dressed, disconcertingly but effectively, in poetic language that does not seem to match their ugliness. Marechera’s representations of wartime atrocity, on the other hand, are grotesque, as we will see in Chapter Three. Although Vera explores the national unconscious she does so carefully: she does not lay it bare in the manner of Marechera.

Another important difference between the two authors is that Vera tends to draw closure on her narrative projects, while Marechera always refuses to do so. This is true for Vera, as we have seen, in *Nehanda*. It is also true, problematically, of *The Stone Virgins* – where we return, with Cephas, whom we learn is an historian (for the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe), to the teleology temporarily abandoned.

A new nation needs to restore the past. His focus, the bee-hive hut, to be installed at Lobengula's ancient kraal in kwoBulawayo the following year. His task is to learn to recreate the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry, the way grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool livable places within; deliverance (Vera 2002: 165).

In this manner Vera attempts to invoke closure, to restore order to the narrative of nationhood - to get us back into a progressive notion of time. By contrast, with Marechera, disorientation is a permanent state: narrative devices are not used to suggest otherwise. From a holistic voice in feminist writing, which could be seen as compromising with existing nationalist tropes, I now turn to another uncompromising and individualist one.

5. No Mood for Compromise: feminist confrontations in Dangarembga

Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps* are important texts in Zimbabwean women's literature. Dangarembga is pivotal to the development of the national literature in that she shifts its focus to the serious consideration of gendered subjectivities, and how these are produced. Her female characters suffer a double oppression under colonialism and patriarchy, and yet choose to resist this, often through direct confrontation. As Rosemary Moyana argues, Dangarembga departs dramatically from standard modes in Zimbabwean literature: "Few [other authors] portray men and women in such glaring antagonism with women ending with the upper hand" (Moyana 1996: 34).

Nervous Conditions

In *Nervous Conditions*, a Bildungsroman, the narrator Tambu recounts a poignant, in many ways triumphant, story about her journey towards self-empowerment against all odds. But this is set, disconcertingly, in juxtaposition to the tragic story of her cousin Nyasha, who is hospitalised for a nervous breakdown – in large part the result of her struggle against oppressive patriarchal forces. Born in colonial Southern Rhodesia but brought up in England before returning to Africa as a teenager in the 1970s, Nyasha suffers the effects of dislocation. "[Nyasha] embodies a nervous disorder arising out of the colonial historical moment in which she finds herself – or...fails to find herself", as Brendon Nicholls observes (2002: 100). At the same time, however, she identifies and confronts the root causes of her oppression. For Nyasha, refusing to eat is a statement of self-autonomy. She locks horns, in this respect, with her father, the novel's patriarch, Babamukuru, who says, "She must eat her food, all of it. She is always doing this, challenging me" (Dangarembga 1988: 194). Although Nyasha complies in an apparent show of obedience, she nevertheless vomits immediately afterwards, and admits to Tambu, "I did it myself. With my toothbrush. Don't ask me why. I don't know" (194). On the one hand this act is one of resistance, yet it is also, obviously, one of self-destruction, as the eating disorder takes its toll. Nyasha's body becomes the battleground and casualty of a lonely struggle. "She was retreating into some private world that we could not reach," states Tambu, after Nyasha's first bout of not eating (120).

Nervous Conditions strikes a chord with many, and has become a classic in African literature because, as the title suggests, it reveals the psychic – or nervous – price to be paid by women within a racist-patriarchal culture. Dangarembga, like Marechera, explores the notion of a psychic split. In fact, Nyasha's ambivalence recalls the narrator's in *The House of Hunger*. Nyasha is also a rebel, "persistently seeing and drawing attention to things you would rather not talk about" (98); she is someone, states Tambu, "who thrived on inconsistencies" (118). Yet she is an individual of uncompromising principles. "She has dared to challenge me" (117), Babamukuru rages, accusing her of sluttish behaviour and insolence, and attempting to settle the score with violence. "'I told you not to hit me', [replies] Nyasha, punching him in the eye" in retaliation (117). She defies his "condemning her to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness" (118), and is unapologetic for her transgressions of patriarchal protocol. Yet the psychic scars of her battle run deep.

Marechera, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, has also explored the psychic dimensions of violence performed on black women by colonialism and patriarchy. Both, it seems, share an interest in Fanon. In fact, the title of Dangarembga's novel is inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, as is the epigraph, "The condition of a native is a nervous condition". But Dangarembga confines her analysis, for the most part, to gender and race. Nyasha's breakdown does not lead to a fuller exploration of the psychosexual components of identity. A 'nervous condition' is a direct consequence of oppression, it is implied, rather than a component of identity for all subjects in racist culture. Before her visit to the psychiatrist and subsequent hospitalisation, Nyasha declares, "They've done it to me...They did it to them too. You know they did...To both of them but especially to him. They put him through it all...Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him" (205-6). "They" refers to the white masters who have inflicted psychic damage on Babamukuru, who in turn has done the same to the girls and women 'beneath' him. Dangarembga's narrative hereby suggests one is driven mad by colonialism.

By way of contrast, with Marechera, there is an 'insanity', a psychic split, at the heart of identity. Colonialism merely exacerbates this: it is not necessarily the root cause. In the 'House of Hunger', a metaphor for a township shack, a family, a nation, and a mind, madness is indeterminate: "diseases were the strange irruptions of a disturbed universe" explains the narrator (Marechera 1978: 7). Yet there is also a transference of the

insanity: “The House has now become my mind; and I do not like the way the roof is rattling” (13), complains the narrator. His own breakdown is recounted alongside the story of a sudden, arbitrary storm: “Such a madness of the elements did not seem possible. Rude buckets of water poured over the school. It rained as though it would flood us out of our minds” (31). In a text that spills out of the anti-colonial genre, Marechera posits an existential account of madness. Although *Nervous Conditions* has a psychic dimension, this is not equivalent to Marechera’s.

She No Longer Weeps

Dangarembga’s *She No Longer Weeps*, a play performed at the University of Zimbabwe in the mid-1980s and published in 1987, has attracted surprisingly little critical attention, despite its importance as a foundational piece of feminist literature and its provocative subject matter. There is not a single essay on this text in the *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga* collection (2002). Here I will consider the play’s exposure of oppressive patriarchal structures, and its controversial model of feminism. Since *She No Longer Weeps* is not widely available and is an unfamiliar text to many, I begin with a descriptive account.

The play chronicles the plight of an unmarried mother in a cruel male-dominated society. The characters are two-dimensional types rather than complex personalities, the effect of which is to sharpen our focus on the issues they represent: gender inequality, discrimination and oppression. When she is five months pregnant, Martha’s womanising prospective husband, Freddy, beats her for interrupting a sex session with Chipso, another of his girlfriends. To escape abuse, Martha returns from Harare to her rural family home but discovers her father, a Christian minister, will not tolerate the presence of an unmarried pregnant daughter in his village: “She belongs to him. She should be with him” (34), he says. But Martha defiantly rejects her father’s authority and the idea of womanly duties: “A man should be able to take care of himself,” (34) she declares, and “the time has come for us to live differently; I don’t have to be tied by those beliefs because I can support myself” (35). To her mother, a traditional woman, she says, “I discovered that the object of life is not to get married like they taught you, but to celebrate our existence” (30). This is a defining moment in Martha’s personal struggle and a breakthrough for feminist drama and literature. It marks the start of a new life and

a new identity for Martha, as an individual – detached from oppressive family structures, as she pioneers a new model of womanhood.

But seven years later, as a successful law partner with a house in the suburbs, and heading her own family, Martha still finds herself ensnared by the structures of patriarchy. Freddy returns to take their daughter (which he claims is his right as the father under customary law). His motive is purely spiteful but she nevertheless realises she has been outwitted. Despite her education and success as a lawyer, the odds are stacked against her in a male-dominated legal system. She gives up on the courts and, consumed with rage, declares war on the patriarchy, starting with Freddy as her first target: “I’m going to make you suffer for the suffering you caused me” (59) is her promise of revenge.

The final scene is one of horror. She arranges the stabbing of Freddy in front of her parents, forces them to watch the choreographed spectacle, then taunts her father, the old patriarch, with the responsibility of reporting the crime: “you were always strong enough to do the right thing. Phone the police. Tell them to come and take me” (59) are the final lines of the play. The scandal is certain to ruin his reputation. In this manner Martha locks horns with the patriarchal system, raising the stakes and courting controversy. It is a deeply symbolic act, which tears the patriarchal family apart, and opens it up to painful public scrutiny. The murder weapon, a breadknife “sharpened this morning especially for you”, she says to her victim (59), is symbolic of domesticity turned into a site of gender warfare: simply put, if Man thinks Woman’s place is in the kitchen, then she will resist with whatever weapon she finds at her disposal.

There is a tendency, already stated, in male-dominated Zimbabwean literature “to make rebellious females suffer the fate of the non-conformist” (Uwakweh 1995: 75). In this instance, however, Dangarembga radically subverts that formula: the non-conforming woman wreaks a revenge of her own. Instead of submitting to punishment, she metes it out herself - refusing to exit the drama without first taking one last stab at the jugular of

patriarchal power, humiliating and destroying the men who have done the same to her.⁸²

The play exposes some of the ugliest features of patriarchy and its apparent intransigence in its depiction of the culture of machismo, violence against women, the complicity of the Church in women's mistreatment, oppressive features of traditional culture and customary law (*lobola* and *roora*), and failures in modern civil law. It is a society where women are destined to lead a life of oppression from the start, unless like Martha they take action.

But the story is not entirely one of men versus women however: patriarchy pits women against each other so that they divide themselves into 'Good Girls' and 'Bad Girls'. Martha's mother blames Martha, not Freddy, for the unplanned pregnancy and the shame it will bring to her father who has to continue preaching to the community: "You are a wicked girl. If I were your father, I would whip you until the baby fell from your womb and then you would be punished and we would be saved" (33). Instead of helping her daughter escape a cycle of violence and oppression, she tries to enforce patriarchal custom, even though this means sending her back to a violent man for more psychological and physical abuse. And there are more divisions between the other women in the play. Freddy's mistresses, Gertrude and Chipso, consider Martha their enemy, but by competing for his attentions, they disempower themselves in a game that none of the women ultimately wins. These betrayals feed Martha's sense of isolation and distrust and possibly explain her total self-reliance and unwillingness to help other women in the future. Working with and looking after other women is not a part of her vision of liberation.

In view of patriarchal intransigence, the text asserts an uncompromising form of feminism, provoking debate through the technique of dramatic shock. The play is as much a polemical treatise as it is a drama, the sketch of a blueprint for a brave new world – a matriarchal one it seems. It analyses the plight of women in Zimbabwe,

⁸² This scene is reminiscent of Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). When I asked Dangarembga (at a "Daughters of Africa" reading and discussion on 21 October 2003 at the Royal Festival Hall, London) about this scene and its reception, she described the knifing as an emasculation. (The stage directions in the published edition are not so specific). Despite its provocative nature, Dangarembga said the play was well-received by a predominantly male audience at the University of Zimbabwe's Beit Hall, in the 1980s. The emasculation was greeted with a mixture of laughter and derision. Dangarembga now distances herself from the fiercely anti-patriarchal elements of *She No Longer Weeps*. She described it to me as a university play, written at a time when she was angry about abuse suffered by a friend (like Martha).

highlights obstacles to their liberation and, in the end, advocates survival of the fittest and feminist vigilantism.

Key to Martha's original strategy is to disentangle herself from familial obligations, all of which, in her view, translate to patriarchal control. She says to her mother, "I don't believe that just because I'm a woman I must sacrifice my potential to looking after some idiotic man and his off-spring" (32). Refusing to follow her mother's submissive role model, she competes as an independent woman in the male-dominated professional world. This, however, necessitates a radical transformation of appearance and attitude.

Martha's transformation can be read as a type of gender reassignment - a stepping out of the stereotypical submission of Woman and a stepping into stereotypical domination of Man. In the first act Freddy says, "You wear trousers like a man, you drink like a man, you argue and challenge men as though you were not a woman yourself" (9). Later she embraces the insult, adopting the role of a hardened businessman both at work and at home. In the third act, instead of being used and abused by men, as she was in the first two acts, she reverses power relationships with the men in her life. In her own re-defined family, Lovemore is her live-in lover but nothing more. The rules of detachment are made clear: "don't get any ideas about owning me. Don't think you can tell me what I can or can't do. And never, never interfere with me or my daughter..." (44). She is the breadwinner, intent on "turning [Sarah] into the sort of person I want her to be" (44), she says. This represents her utmost determination to confront the traditional patriarchal family model, replacing it instead with total matriarchal control. Martha refuses to be the victim of domestic violence and instead pays two thugs to beat men up for her. Thus she skilfully eliminates all forms of external male-dominated interference, all obstacles to her self-empowerment.

Martha's 'triumph' in the third act is the result of her systematic rejection of patriarchal family obligations and prescribed gender roles for women. But she becomes so hardened in her battle against the system that, as Mrs Chiwara states, "she's like a stone" (1987: 50). In her struggle to overcome the stigma of being an independent woman and a single mother, Martha cannot afford to weep, hence the title of the play. For Martha, success as an independent woman requires the elimination of emotions deemed to be weaknesses in a patriarchalist society. She accepts the conditions set by patriarchy and strives according to its measures of success.

Her philosophy is reduced to one of self-survival and this is the only advice she has to offer others. She tells Mrs Mutsika of WAPIM (Women's Association for the Protection of the Illegitimate Mother), who seeks support:

I'm sorry, I can't help you. I don't want to become a public figure and I certainly don't want to speak for women who don't want to be spoken for.... They will have to help themselves like we all do. I was forced to help myself. It has hardened me, Mrs Mutsika. Because of that I no longer feel pain or pity or sympathy, and that is good (50).

These harsh words from Martha indicate that she believes in survival of the fittest and feels no duty or obligation to other women in similar predicaments. She has little sympathy or respect for those who do not take the initiative to help themselves: "it's much easier to be a domestic slave to a man than it is to take responsibility for your own life" (48).

Although she envisions a society in which as women "we must take sole responsibility for everything we produce" (48) - especially children, Martha is not prepared to work directly with other women to achieve this vision. "To the extent that I am a woman and have my personal battles to fight with the taxman, my employers and lecherers in the streets, I am fighting for all women," she says, "But I cannot help your prostitutes. I refuse to do it" (50). The last remark disparages the single mothers represented by WAPIM and the organisation itself. Uncompromising in its individualism, Martha's feminist model may be criticised for retaining an unhelpful distinction between worthy and unworthy women.

Dangarembga's play, in its thorough indictment of oppressive patriarchal practices, and its highlighting of gender injustices, advocates a pathway to emancipation. Paradoxically, however, it collapses back into the same system of oppression that it is trying to overcome when Martha begins to replicate the worst features of masculinist society - ruthlessness, bourgeois materialism, uncompromising ambition, etc. The play therefore functions not only as an indictment of patriarchy but also of Martha's radical feminist formula for women's emancipation. Martha finds an identity of her own outside traditional family structures but at a considerable price. She loses her sensitivity

and compassion on the warpath. The killing at the end certainly demonstrates the depth of her anger but does not necessarily represent a triumph over the system (it can equally be read as capitulation). It is its shock value as a scene that matters, however, and provokes discussion.

Is Martha's form of self-emancipation what other women necessarily aspire to? Are her rather masculinist aspirations really an agreeable blueprint for women's liberation in Zimbabwe? And can the battle against patriarchy really be seen in such categorical terms? In fact the play consciously or unconsciously performs a critique of itself; and Dangarembga's own reassessment of radical feminism several years later is pertinent to this important (though problematic) piece, written at an early stage in her career:

I have come a long way in my thinking from really dichotomizing the issue or dividing up the world by gender, because you cannot ignore the other powers that really inform life itself....I think it is too simplistic really to just always look at the gender issue as if there is such a pure dimension. I think one has to be much more aware of interactions and try to actually mark out the components of these effects. So I'm always very wary of thinking just in terms of gender (George and Scott 1993: 313).

Here Dangarembga's increasingly anti-categorical outlook begins to converge in some respects with Marechera's.

In his early aesthetics of Zimbabwean writing, Musa Zimunya argues that the family exists as a metaphor for social unity: "the African *family* ... with its complex and unifying extensions" unites the community and society "physically and spiritually... for good or for worse" (1982: 6).⁸³ Yet Marechera's narrator and Dangarembga's protagonist have no reverence for this institution. Both assert the identity of individuals outside family structures, and therefore refuse the patriarchal family its "unifying extensions".

⁸³ This is due in large part to the fact that rural, agrarian, pastoral lifestyles and livelihoods tend to foster family oriented societies; and Zimbabwe's population is still 70% rural. A spiritual understanding of the family is also important in Zimbabwe, as Lan (1985) demonstrates, where many people (particularly in rural areas) consider themselves and their destinies closely linked to their ancestors.

Although Marechera does not specifically pursue a feminist agenda in *House of Hunger*, his subversion of the idea and the ideal of the unified patriarchal family works towards the type of individual emancipation that Martha envisages in *She No Longer Weeps* – a complete detachment from familial obligations. In this sense the authors and their narrative projects, although contrasting in terms of style, begin to coincide in terms of strategy.

In *House of Hunger* the family is in the process of disintegration. The 'House' is a metaphor for the disturbed mind of the narrator, a fragmented family, and an impoverished nation: "It was the House of Hunger that first made me discontented with things. I knew my father only as the character who occasionally screwed mother and paid the rent, beat me up, and was cuckolded on the sly by various persons" (Marechera 1978: 77). As Abdulrazak Gurnah states:

In Marechera's story, the patriarchal figure is 'de-centred', and the home and the family represent chaos and oppression... Rather than being a metaphor for social unity (even in its oppression), here the family is figured as bizarre and sadistic, and every relationship and role reveals the individual's capacity for despair (1995: 106-7).

Marechera thus sets a precedent for radically dismantling the trope of family in Zimbabwean literature, in his case exposing it as completely dysfunctional. Although Marechera's indictment of the social order works through the surreal and the bizarre, while Dangarembga's tends to adapt conventional realist forms, on this theme the two writers can be linked.

Both *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps* are noteworthy for their uncompromising, unapologetic feminism in opposition to the obstacles presented by a stubborn patriarchy. And both deploy shock as a destabilising element. Whereas *She No Longer Weeps* ends with a stunning statement, *Nervous Conditions* begins with the protagonist, Tambudzai, declaring: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling" (Dangarembga 1988: 1). Since her brother's death facilitates her education and passage towards emancipation, Tambu can justify her sentiments. Also shocking, as we have

seen, is Nyasha's willingness to strike back at the patriarchal figure - physically if necessary.

To the great disappointment of her readers, Dangarembga has been silent in literature since the publication of *Nervous Conditions* in 1988. Asked in interview in 1993 if she was working on a new novel she said:

Yes... But it takes time because I find it very difficult to write. One has to be the model as well as the writer and so you're constantly in and out...There is nothing out there you can look at – you have to first experience it and then jump out and reconstruct that. Writing through Tambudzai in *Nervous Conditions* enabled me to work in a mainstream feminist analysis that was much easier than what I am attempting now. Now I'd like to go beyond that (George and Scott 1993: 318-9)

It seems Dangarembga has no plans for a sequel to *She No Longer Weeps* or *Nervous Conditions* but for a markedly different feminist literary project. One reason for Dangarembga's long silence could be the difficulty of finding a form and style to accommodate a more complicated outlook and a changing social and political landscape.

6. New Dialogues and Directions

In this section I consider four significant women writers - Barbara Makhalisa and Kristina Rungano, who rose to prominence in the 1980s; and Nozipo Maraire and Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, who entered the literary scene in the 1990s. All four present a challenge to male-dominated literature and culture. A comparison reveals a diversity of styles and perspectives, but some common strands as well. The issues are sexual abuse, sexual morality, reproductive rights, labola and polygamy. A tension between traditional culture and the rise of modern black feminism is noticeable in this writing. Standard forms are deployed as well as innovative adaptations; and there are instances of dialogue and/or affinity with Marechera, as we will see.

Makhalisa is a respected figure on the Zimbabwean literary scene because she was one of the first black women to establish a writing career within the male-dominated industry. *The Underdog and Other Stories* (1984) is an important early work. The title-piece, set just before and shortly after independence, is a thorough indictment of chauvinistic attitudes. Netsai, the first person narrator and protagonist, leaves school and her rural home for the city because of the war. She is sexually harassed and exploited by district administrators, then raped by her uncle, molested and impregnated by her employer's husband, and sentenced to prison for two years with hard labour for performing an abortion on herself – an action which lands her in hospital. Netsai suffers abuse at every turn in a society where male privilege and power are starkly drawn in opposition to the plight of women. Following her ordeal, she concludes, “My God, all men are the same...Selfish, self-centred beasts!” (1984: 32).

The Underdog is one of the first Zimbabwean texts to treat the issue of abortion in a somewhat sympathetic fashion: “What is the point of bringing a baby into the world when it will neither be loved nor cared for properly?” (37), asks Janet, a friend to Netsai. Nevertheless, true to convention, Netsai ultimately suffers punishment for her transgressive action at the end of the narrative. Makhalisa's use of form typifies a long tradition in vernacular literature in its denouncing “the ‘loose’ life in the cities and uphold[ing] responsible, monogamous marriages” (Veit-Wild 1993: 248). This genre – which focuses on lessons to be learnt – was first popularised by Archbishop Patrick Chakaipa, a well-known figure in the national literature. However, Makhalisa feminises the form, rejecting its usual misogynist biases and bringing serious issues affecting

women (rape, sexual harassment, abortion, anorexia, etc.) to the fore. Nevertheless, Gaidzanwa criticises “the portrayal of women [as] stereotypic in a different way” (1985: 80), and points out that “a view of women as victims prevails” (94), which is not enabling. Another critic, Edna Ncube, complains moreover that “Makhalisa has set out to write with the Christian enterprise in mind and she tends to ‘preach to her readers to be good in order to be accepted in the life hereafter’” (quoted in Veit-Wild 1993: 248).⁸⁴

Makhalisa’s concern for victims in society connects her with Marechera - despite their differences in so many other respects. Marechera’s anti-moralistic, anti-didactic approach seems diametrically opposed to Makhalisa’s. Yet her poem, “Weep Not” written “for Dambudzo Marechera” is published in the Zimbabwe Women Writers 1994 anthology, as if to promote an association between her concerns, those of women’s writing, and the infamous author. This is yet another instance of Marechera returning as an unexpected touchstone in women’s writing.

In the Marecheran spirit of contradiction, the poem is an anti-eulogising eulogy. Written several years after his death, it evidences his presence as a lingering ghost on the literary scene – a figure with whom writers and readers can and do still commune. Marechera’s AIDS, isolation and depression in his final years are now generally known. Makhalisa adopts the voice of the dead author to criticise those she sees as false eulogisers, now singing his praises but who ignored him during his time of critical need.

Where was your care
When lonely I brooded
In my dreary dungeon
When my guts writhed
As hunger gnawed
At my heart strings
When thirst parched
My craving and cramping belly
Where was your fondness?

⁸⁴ In *Eva’s Song* (1996), Makhalisa continues in the same vein to criticise a society that victimises women. One of the stories, “Together”, for example, attributes a young girl’s anorexia nervosa to pressures from the media – the slim Naomi Campbell ideal and an overemphasis on thinness in popular culture. But Eva and her mother learn, by the end of the narrative, the value of solidarity, as they pledge to fight the disease “together”.

Your eyes shied away
From the shrunken shambles
And your present passion
Is but a fleeting cloud

But
My lines immortal sneer
At your sniffy snobbery
(ZWW 1994: 53)

Makhalisa's monologue, lacking in irony, is out of kilter with Marechera's polyphonic, self-reflexive style and is perhaps not an appropriate tribute for this reason. But the poem is more than just a tribute. Makhalisa seems to appropriate Marechera's voice to express her own views, something she is generally accused of in her use of characters in her fiction. True to her style, there is a preachy tone, a focus on the plight of a victim, and a moral lesson to be learnt. She returns to classic images from *The House of Hunger* ("guts writhed", "hunger gnawed", "thirst parched", "cramping belly") to protest the poverty and deprivation suffered by Marechera, who was ignored in an uncaring society. Makhalisa seems to be claiming him as a voice for other victims of society, including women, who have been marginalised or mistreated.

Inhabiting the anger for which Marechera was famed, Makhalisa expresses contempt for superficial sentiment ("sniffy snobbery"). There is an obvious empathy with the author (or, more precisely, a certain image of him) and a desire, in some sense, to likewise attain the "immortal", scornful power of words he is held to represent. In short the poem admires the ghost of Marechera whose "lines immortal sneer" and triumph over false pretences. He seems a figure with whom women writers might identify if they are inspired, like Makhalisa, by his independence of mind and spirit of defiance.

But many women writers, in their attempt to find an emancipated voice, through writing, remain caught in predominant nationalist or social realist tropes that limit their exploration. Or else, as is the case with Makhalisa, there is a tendency to collapse back into the problematic tropes of the moral discourse that first shaped women's representations and writing under the auspices of the Literature Bureau.

Kristina Rungano, a significant poet who is somewhat neglected in Zimbabwean literary criticism, devises an innovative anti-patriarchal style and subverts masculinist assumptions in her early poetry. Although at an early stage in the development of black women's literature she explores a route out of predominant patterns, she nevertheless slips, at times, into moralising. In his introduction to the first volume, *A Storm is Brewing* (1984), written when the poet was just eighteen, Lewis Nkosi writes: "Kristina Rungano, we hope, is only one of the first women writers who will join the now formidable array of Zimbabwean male poets" (Rungano 1984: iv). She says "I am not a feminist" but, Nkosi remarks, after reading some of her poems, "one is tempted to retort that if she isn't she ought to be!" (iii).

Rungano significantly disrupts traditional images of women. As Veit-Wild states, her poem "This Morning" is "quite open about the physical side of love, something which you don't often find in modern African poetry; especially expressed by women" (Veit-Wild 1988: 107). The sexually explicit imagery is unmistakable in the first few lines of the poem:

This morning I visited the place where we lay like animals
O pride be forgotten
And how the moon bathed our savage nakedness in purity
And your hands touched mine in silken caress
And our beings were cleansed as tho' by wine.
Then you stroked my breast
And thro' love I shed the tears of my womb
O sweet fluid spilled in the name of love
O love
... (112)

Rungano's persona is describing a female orgasm - unusual and controversial in the Zimbabwean context in view of the fact the speaker is a woman. Typically her female personae, as above, have few inhibitions about expressing sexual enjoyment, which is an integral theme of the love poetry. This goes against the grain of convention in Zimbabwean literature, which, as we have already seen, frequently writes sexually active women as whores.

In an original gesture, in her second volume of poetry, *ALOISA*, she goes a step further to throw the stigma of “Whore” back onto men. Of her poem “ALOISA”, in which she adopts a male persona (also an unusual manoeuvre) she says:

I was trying to put myself in the shoes of men because men are usually the ones who are blamed for infidelity and I have tried to give them reasons like, everyone has their desires, and men have been socialized to be the weaker sex, to be left to their designs, they don't have to worry about their reputation, they have been allowed to let go off [sic] their emotions, to be loose and so on (106).

She shows interest in the hidden vulnerable masculine emotions that surround sexual infidelity: “I also find that most men sometimes feel guilt about it” (106). In the second stanza, the male persona, Aloisa, an unfaithful lover, confesses:

I am
A very ordinary man
In a ve[r]y ordinary situation
Deprived of guts
I am a whore
Because society permits it
I've lain in the dusts with my mother's pride
Because I'm shamed by my past
I soil my future
....(115)

Rungano turns classic cultural assumptions around. Aloisa recognises his sexual promiscuity is a sign of masculine weakness, not strength (which challenges the opposite view in the culture of machismo). In the third stanza, after an act of adultery it seems, he does not feel positively transformed but guilty:

What reincarnation
No.
I Jezebel
Lie here

Watch the laughing eyes of the sky
Where yesterday wined and dined
Seen love
Walk over destroy
I am no longer just me (115).

He admits powerlessness to control libidinal drives, and this is considered a flaw in his character, because – as he later reflects – it can senselessly wreck real love. In another unusual gendered inversion to the poem, Aloisa calls himself Jezebel and identifies with the famous biblical harlot.⁸⁵ He acknowledges that because of his sexual philandering, “I am no longer just me”.

Rungano turns the image of the whore around to question the behaviour of promiscuous men, such as Aloisa, instead of women (who, it is implied, are inherently more faithful) but although this can be recognised as a feminist strategy to redress patriarchalist perceptions of the opposite in mainstream fiction, she nevertheless problematically retains ‘Whore’ as a pejorative signifier. Judeo-Christian concepts of morality and sexual sin remain embedded and unquestioned in Rungano’s poetry, which to a great extent retains a dichotomy between sexual virtue and sexual vice. The tone is also somewhat judgmental: sex outside a loving monogamous relationship is considered reckless and immoral because it is presumed to subvert a certain ideal of love. The assumption is that all ‘whores’ are bad, though in Rungano’s view they are more likely to be male than female. As we will see, significantly, with Marechera, the Whore is also masculine and feminine, but amoral, not immoral: this is a key point of comparison. Nevertheless, in her inventive subversions and inversions and her inhabiting of a male persona, Rungano unsettles the standard treatment of gender in Zimbabwean literature and gestures somewhat towards, in her words, “an ambiguous situation” (106) which allows some leeway for open interpretation. One wonders why, since her early and promising poetic debut, Rungano has disappeared from the literary scene. It is possible that, like Dangarembga, Rungano has found it difficult to contain an increasingly complicated outlook within conventional forms available to her.

⁸⁵ There is also some gender ambiguity in the name Aloisa, which is interesting. In the interview Veit-Wild comments: “I have always thought Aloisa is a woman’s name.” (107).

Nozipo Maraire's *Zenzele* (1996) vacillates between the predominant tropes in Zimbabwean literature. It is described by Literary Review as "a book about choices: whether to embrace an ancient African heritage or a Western industrial view of the world, whether to assume the role of a strident feminist or rejoice in the role of mother and wife" (Maraire 1996: book cover blurb). The narrator, referred to as Mama, writes the long letter, in the form of anecdotes and parables, to Zenzele, to share with her the experiences of her relatives, and to help her find the correct path in the world. Zenzele has left Harare to take up her studies in America. Unlike Dangarembga's play, this narrative celebrates the forgotten values enshrined in the traditional family and traditional culture. However, it also acknowledges generational change and a tension between the old and new markers of culture and identity. There are lessons to be learnt in Mama's wise words but the tone is not entirely didactic: rather it records differences of opinion and vibrant debates. On the subject of lobola, Mama tells Zenzele:

You must not take the Western anthropologists' view of our culture. They perceive our customs through their lens. There are terms and customs that cannot be translated adequately into their language and so become distorted. *Lobola* is called "bride price", kings are "chiefs", our medicine is called "witchcraft", and our religion is labelled "animist". They do not capture the spirit of our culture (Maraire 1996: 32).

But Zenzele, by now a young feminist with a mind of her own, says: "Mama, you are defending a custom that identifies women as property, transferred from father to husband. It is dreadful. I shall have none of it" (32). Taking the side of tradition, Mama retorts: "You cannot reject a custom simply because it is vulnerable to abuse. That is like not going to church because there are so many hypocrites there" (32). Zenzele is unconvinced, however:

...I suppose in the old days when everyone understood it all, it worked. But nowadays, when people start sending cheques in the mail or using credit cards for lobola, as if they are paying for a pack of beer or a phone bill, then I find it indecent. It is also horrid for men to beat their wives, abuse them or make demands because they feel they have bought them. (34).

Maraire's narrative criticises the ugliest manifestations of patriarchy, yet shows nostalgia for an inherent goodness in traditional ways which are now under siege in the age of globalisation and modern corruptions. Its gender politics are somewhat conservative amidst anxiety about the rapid modern transformation of indigenous Zimbabwean culture: "We simply rushed to secure what the colonialists had", admits Mama, who does not want Zenzele to make the same mistake and risk sacrificing her rich cultural heritage. But Mama's upper middle class lifestyle in the elite suburbs of Harare, and her clearly cosmopolitan identity, reveals tensions and contradictions of its own. The advice to Zenzele therefore, is often expressed in terms of, "Do as I say, not as I do." Maraire's novel is conscious, to some extent, of this contradiction – an unresolved tension between the conflicting forces of traditionalism and modernity.

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo's short story, *Deciduous Gazettes* (1999) demonstrates an innovative new feminist writing talent in the tradition of Menippean satire. In her irreverent style, she may be considered an heir to Marechera. The title of the story, *Deciduous Gazettes*, indicates a loose and changeable structure, an annual or periodic shedding of news (like a tree shedding leaves) about current affairs and events which is open-ended and renewable, not sealed off. As Abrams explains, Menippean satires are "held together by a loosely constructed narrative":

A major feature is a series of extended dialogues and debates (often conducted at a banquet or party) in which a group of loquacious eccentrics, pedants, literary people, and representatives of various professions or philosophical points of view serve to make ludicrous the attitudes and viewpoints they typify by the arguments they urge in their support (Abrams 1993: 188-9).

This form is appropriate to the theme of social change – in this case transforming gender relations, for example polygamy. In *House of Hunger* Marechera exposes an awkward contradiction in national liberation narratives:

Actually, class-consciousness and the conservative snobbery that goes with it are deeply rooted in the African élite, who are in the same breath able to shout LIBERATION, POLYGAMY without feeling that something is unhinged (Marechera 1978: 44).

Marechera deflated “the conservative snobbery” of an “African élite”, making an early call for reflexivity about the gender oppression frequently obscured in narratives of nationalist struggle. Two decades later, Myambo explores this contradiction in the irreverent, subversive Menippean style pioneered by Marechera in Zimbabwean literature.

The central character in Myambo’s story is the eccentric Saru, a feminist, who is married to Hans, an Austrian professor. She divides her time between the social set of Frankfurt and Harare, usually advising her married female friends not to accept any form of male domination or infidelity. She is a charismatic, messianic figure and this garners her a large following of women who seem to bask in the aftermath of her outrageous patriarchal subversions – her ‘feminist miracles’.

One of her friends is Hannah Ncube. Hannah’s husband, Mr Ncube, who represents the voice of patriarchy in the narrative, does not like Saru and describes her, as “a ‘loose firecracker’”:

He constantly complained about her reckless smoking in public; her disregard for womanly dignity; he doubted whether she was legally married. What kind of a woman, if she is natural, normal, does not produce offspring? The word ‘whore’ was scratching his throat but he didn’t spit it out because he feared her (Myambo 1999: 21).

Since Saru is a devout church-going Christian it is difficult for Mr Ncube and others to pin that label on her. She is always a step ahead in the battle against patriarchal stigmatisation. Before invading cocktail parties and barbeques, where she performs her subversions with such confidence and ease, Saru first establishes her legitimacy according to the rules of middle-class multi-racial Harare society. The main criterion is marriage, which she fulfils quite easily, though she also feels free to leave her husband behind in Frankfurt and has no particular reverence for him or his friends. Saru refuses to be bound by the terms of a patriarchal concept of marriage.

She shares the following anecdote, indicative of her ingeniously subversive powers:

‘Hanna, my friend, did I ever tell you about the Africans in Frankfurt? ...One day Hans came home with an Algerian, a Senegalese and a Malian – countries you and I have never seen. They, all four men, sat down and began to discuss the Islamic faith and whether it was oppressive to women. All four sat and agreed it wasn’t...According to the Quran, a man may take up to four wives. All four vociferously discussed the value and historical reasons for this tradition. Then my fellow Africans turned to me and said: ‘How do you do it in Zimbabwe?’

‘I looked at each of them, glowing with the exertion of intellectual exercise, and I told them, this: “In Zimbabwe, it is the inverse situation. One woman may marry up to eight men.” They were completely taken aback, nausea flitted across their faces, their hands trembled with self-righteousness and they sputtered out simultaneously: “But how do you know who the father of the child is?” said one. “That’s filthy. One woman cannot sleep with so many men. It’s disgusting,” said the other, and the third: “Whose surname does the child take?”

‘Calmly, I explained that we did not mind who the father of the child was: all my husbands would live together in harmony and nurture that child who would, naturally, take my family name, as did my husbands. We, I stated clearly, did not think of this as filthy but it was our tradition, our culture, our heritage – any woman who had the economic means was able, if she so wished, to take up to eight husbands (29-30).

Saru intelligently disrupts the naturalisation of patriarchy wherever she encounters it. Refusing to accept the problematic concept of an immutable pan-Africanist male-dominated culture, she imagines instead the possibility of a matriarchal society in Zimbabwe and asserts this quite confidently as a reality, a long traditional practice and a cultural difference, which should be respected. The same arguments of cultural conservatism legitimising patriarchal polygamy are ingeniously used to legitimise the concept of matriarchal polygamy. In the Menippean tradition, this “serve[s] to make ludicrous the attitudes and viewpoints” of Saru’s opponents. In *Deciduous Gazettes* Myambo deploys wit and irony in reversing standard gender roles, and destabilising patriarchy’s claims to naturalness. Although it touches on the theme of religion, with its church-going messianic character, Saru, Myambo’s story is somewhat sacrilegious in its unorthodox adaptations of biblical symbols and images.

This text is markedly different from Maraire's novel, which criticises strident feminism and celebrates misunderstood virtues of old ways, as well as the value of women's experiences from the past. However, although *Zenzele* is sceptical of modernity, it is undeniably implicated in it.

Rungano and Myambo are more proactive, less conservative, than Maraire in their strategic reversals of patriarchal assumptions. Rungano openly celebrates the pleasure of feminine sexuality, while at the same time switching the sign of Whore from women to men. However, her poetic style tends towards the high-minded and moralistic. In contrast, Myambo's narrative – which also criticises hypocritical male infidelity – does so in a satirical style that is layered with sacrilegious motifs, humour and irony.

7. Trends in Zimbabwean Women's Writing and Connections with Marechera

In her assessment of an emergent feminist sensibility, led by Dangarembga, in the Zimbabwean context, Moyana quotes Hélène Cixous:

[woman] must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history (Moyana 1994: 31).

Cixous's rallying call is relevant to the women's fiction and poetry considered in this chapter, which counteracts male domination and demonstrates a degree of self or group empowerment, but in a way that reconfirms that women's emancipation is not simply achieved.

One such problem is that of dichotomising. Within the Chimurenga model there is some diversity of style but usually stark oppositions are drawn and military images are deployed of the sexes at war. A masculinised, militarised model of liberation tends to be assumed. Disturbingly, there is often a sorting into 'good women' (seen as virtuous, maternal, serving, long-suffering) and 'bad women' (seen as irresponsible, wayward, sexually unrestrained or prostitutes). Thus, certain ideals of womanhood are venerated while others are degraded or castigated, and often the female characters or writers re-enforce this pecking order themselves, without much reflexivity. Nationalist or 'revolutionary' socialist ideologies tend to measure womanly virtue or vice by reference to hierarchical systems bearing a patriarchal cast.

Another dichotomising takes place outside the Chimurenga model, best summed up by Netsai's conclusion in *The Underdog* that "My God, all men are the same...Selfish, self-centred beasts!" (Makhalisa 1984:32) and Martha's declaration of war on patriarchy with a breadknife in *She No Longer Weeps*. Here strategy divides into two camps: collective versus individual action. Makhalisa and other Zimbabwe Women Writers advocate collective action. Typically, women are seen as victims and men as aggressors. But the idea of perpetual victimhood can prove defeatist and disempowering. Dangarembga also criticises male aggression in her play but dismisses both collective action and victimhood, and takes, instead, an individual focus on women's issues.

Martha, the exemplar of a possible modern Zimbabwean feminism, entirely independent of men, refuses to sympathise with or speak on behalf of other women, though paradoxically, through her symbolic actions, she does.

Dangarembga provocatively polarises gender issues (though she accepts this is ultimately problematic). She is unwilling to compromise with patriarchalist narrative forms. Whereas Makhalisa tends to adhere to traditional Literature Bureau form, where deviant women are punished for their misdemeanours (Netsai is sympathised with but nevertheless imprisoned for her abortion), Dangarembga attacks that formula when Martha metes out her own form of justice at the end of *She No Longer Weeps*.

Vera's *Nehanda* best represents the rather different strategy of skilful compromise. Boldly reinventing the myth of Nehanda, feminising it, and rewriting history through fiction, she nevertheless concedes considerable ground to the male-dominated cultural nationalism. Yet Vera is also an ambiguous and complex writer, and her subsequent novels can be read as also problematising the narrative of nationhood. Most significantly, however, unlike Marechera, she engages in the project of nation-building. Sinclair also exemplifies the skill (and cost) of compromise with masculinist authority in the process of bringing *Flame* and its important gender issues to cinema screens in Zimbabwe.

A moralising strand of feminism is most evident in Makhalisa's writing. Other didactic styles are evident in Mahamba's novella, Nyamubaya's anthology and much of the struggle poetry considered (which in fact tends to emphasise the need for education, though it does not specify what type). Although Maraire's novel offers moral guidance, its didacticism is tempered with a willingness to engage in debate. Noticeably, however, these texts promote a certain womanly virtue, accepted as given.

Innovative reversals of patriarchal discourse are a characteristic of writing by Rungano and Myambo. Irony and humour characterise a new style represented by Myambo. This unusual form in women's writing indicates a possible new direction in Zimbabwean feminist literature. There is growing evidence of a desire to write against the grain of standard forms and to challenge the structures of patriarchy at an increasingly complex discursive level. The critic is challenged to keep pace with developments in Zimbabwean writing; and here comparisons with Marechera prove fruitful in

broadening the discourse. The issues addressed and the strategies employed by this array of Zimbabwean women writers are often relevant to Marechera's treatment of gender, as I have indicated, and there are several possible points of dialogue. Marechera shows a propensity to problematise, complicate and debate pertinent issues of gender, and this is important to emergent feminism and Zimbabwean literary and cultural studies. However, it has been argued, on the contrary, that Marechera performs a disservice to women in his writing. It is necessary to engage with these criticisms before drawing final conclusions as to his significance.

8. Mothers and Whores: Marechera's controversial representations of women

In 1986, Chenjerai Hove, then a literary editor for Zimbabwe Publishing House, recommended the rejection of a collection of Marechera's poetry partly on the basis of "its derogatory references to women," because "woman is the mother of 'bastards', the 'bitch' or the 'wench'. And woman is simply a sexual object, nothing more" (Veit-Wild 1992: 350-1). Hove claimed "This portrayal betrays the struggle to improve woman's position in society" and he could not "envisage the level of readership which would enjoy these poems" (351).⁸⁶ He criticised Marechera's "proclaimed anarchistic vision" (350), expressing concern that "some of the notions expressed seem to defeat the struggle to improve the status of women in our society" (351).⁸⁷

Despite the apparently offensive nature of his writing, however, it is a point worth noting that feminist critiques, particularly by women, are few and far between.⁸⁸ In fact, Makhalisa, as we have seen, has nothing but praise for the late author. Gaidzanwa, in her reading of *House of Hunger*, claims even-handedness in the author's derisions: "While Marechera outlines the whorish and indecent behaviour of the mother and wife he does not glamourise or condone the drunken husband either" (1985: 38). Gaidzanwa also heralds, as we shall see, Marechera's progressive representation of prostitution in the character of Nestar. This suggests, to me, an ambivalent response to Marechera on issues of gender, an awareness of the complexity he represents, and a reluctance to condemn. Jane Bryce takes issue with Hove for this reason:

Although disgust and fear are certainly a part of the response to women, I think it is once again a misreading to see this as in any way prescriptive or definitive. Sexuality and violence are explored within a context of state repression and dehumanisation, with often contradictory results...His aim is not ideological

⁸⁶ This was partly because of their references to Graeco-Roman mythology, as I have discussed with regard to the Amelia sonnets in Chapter One.

⁸⁷ Veit-Wild extracts this report from the Zimbabwe Publishing House editorial files for her book *Dambudzo Marechera*.

⁸⁸ I have searched extensively for these and, to my knowledge, there are no others besides those addressed in this thesis.

purity but an unflinching exploration of often dangerous territory (1999: 231).⁸⁹

Hove hoped Marechera would re-edit and resubmit his work, “removing inconsistencies of imagery while giving the poems a sense of place through localising the imagery and the subject matter” (Veit-Wild 1993: 351). Obviously Marechera was never going to do this. The point here is that Hove misinterprets the “inconsistencies of imagery”, for which Marechera is famed, as an artistic flaw – not valid poetic strategy. What Hove fails to appreciate is that it is precisely through his dislocations of imagery that Marechera achieves a fundamental disruption of the patriarchalist norm. This, ironically, can be seen as his important contribution to the struggle for women’s emancipation. In short, this is not straightforward misogyny at all.

I have viewed a sampling from *Cemetery of Mind* in speculation of the style and representation that was unacceptable to ZPH. In “The Declaration”, the persona states “I dare not love you any more / I am sick like any other dreadful whore” (163). Most significantly, Marechera uses the first person to express empathy with other prostitutes; thus the stigmatised other becomes the self. In “The Cemetery in the Mind” he contrasts his beloved Amelia with “one of those diseased City whores” (176), returning to the theme of contagion and degradation, but reflexively. In “Who’s Used my New Rucksack!?” he states “And I thought even a son-of-a-bitch’s / Supposed to have FAMILY” (186). These lines pour scorn on the ideology of a cohesive patriarchal family (which, as I have shown with regard to Dangarembga, can coincide with a radical feminist strategy). In “Where the Bastard is God?” he describes a personal breakdown as “Not filthy quiet / Like the death of a whore” (187). The simile is evocative yet critical of the degraded life of a prostitute. Again there is empathy and the critique extends to the society which uses, abuses and castigates the Whore. He ends “An Expelled Student’s Case for Retaining Old English” with an apparently random insult: “the fucking little bitch” (193). Any one of these references could be considered degrading and offensive at first sight, but Marechera subverts the automatic, unreflexive stigmatisation of prostitution. Also, although Woman is often sexualised in Marechera’s writing, she is never “simply a sexual object” as Hove alleges. On the contrary, she

⁸⁹ Veit-Wild, also at odds with Hove, criticises his own depiction of women in *Bones* which, she claims, “reiterates an outdated and over-simplified image of the poor, illiterate, ‘native’ woman” (1993: 317-8) and presents a “sometimes absurdly nostalgic image of women” which “excludes any awareness of the crisis of identity which the Zimbabwean woman has undergone in the last decades” (318). Her critique is hotly disputed and possibly unfair itself, but it nevertheless importantly highlights the issue of images: what counts as progressive, appropriate imagery and what does not?

usually displays a remarkable degree of sexual autonomy – and this is recognised and accepted by Marechera (though in the dominant patriarchal ideology of Zimbabwe it is perceived as negative). Moreover, Marechera deliberately collapses the dichotomy of virtue and vice in the signification of womanhood – a lynchpin of patriarchal and nationalist ideology.

I do not mean, necessarily, to defend all of Marechera's representations but to put them into a different perspective. Marechera challenges the simplistic equation of prostitution with corruption and vice in the moral discourse underpinning patriarchal ideology. In mainstream Zimbabwean literature, the Whore is often a figure of derision. "What Are You Going to Do Now, Virginia?" a poem by Charles Mungoshi displays the attitude. Virginia, it seems, is more a mistress than a prostitute but in patriarchal Zimbabwean ideology the two are one and the same and she is, in any event, tarred with the same brush. Virginia is anything but a virgin and this is the core of the poem's masculinist 'irony'.

The speaker, a former admirer and lover of the now ageing Virginia, delights in her decline as though it were divine justice, retribution for her life of vice:

...

Time finds too many faults with you now.

The red paint on your fingertips:

everyone knows you have fought too many

bedroom wars

to have any claws left.

The women whose husbands you stole

know what you are hiding beneath that expensive Afro wig:

they should know, Virginia.

Strands of your original hair

are still scattered in their

bedrooms...

(Mungoshi 1981: 18)

A judgmental tone is clear, as is an unreflexive misogyny:

There is also a rumour, Virginia a rumour: is it true
your unsuckled breasts have withered to the size of
a sixth finger? They know
about the wire-gauze support, Virginia (18).

Virginia is mocked for her “unsuckled breasts”: the ‘joke’ is that she has never been a proper mother (if she has ever had children at all) and therefore, it is implied, she has never achieved the status of ‘real’ womanhood. Old age now shrinks her breasts in revenge. But there are more indignities and insults:

...
You have become
a public monument, Virginia
Your mysteries have been forwarded
to the local market-place. You have become
public property, Virginia
(19)

M.Z. Malaba, reviewing the poem, applauds “a certain poetic justice in seeing someone who flouted society norms becoming ‘public property’” and describes the ending as a “*coup de grace*” (Malaba 2003: 91). This indicates an anti-prostitute attitude extending to current literary criticism. In the final stanza, rumour has it that Virginia’s ex-lovers are “planning a special farewell party /...This crocodile ball” (Mungoshi 1981: 19). It seems they would like to throw her to the crocodiles in the Hunyani River - punishment for implicating them in her immorality. The speaker, too, says he would like “to bid you a/ decent/ farewell” (19). Thus, the last of her disaffected lovers and admirers now also wants to witness her final comeuppance. It seems all are agreed, the ex-lovers, the speaker and the poet, that Virginia deserves to meet with a nasty end. The misogyny in this poem has a disturbingly violent element to it, all the more so because it is couched within a moral discourse that justifies the punishment of ‘wayward women’. Obviously, however, this is a type of misogyny that Zimbabwean publishers and critics have been prepared to overlook, if not endorse. I point this out to highlight a distinction with regard to Marechera’s poetry, deemed offensive and unpublishable.

Unlike Mungoshi (and most of his contemporaries), Marechera refuses to stigmatise prostitution in this judgmental manner. It can be argued he shows sympathy, not contempt, for the figure of the Whore. This is evident in his representations of Nestar, Julia and Mother, who prostitute themselves in *House of Hunger*, but nevertheless hold their heads high in society. Nestar – one of Marechera's strongest female characters - refuses to see herself as a victim. As Gaidzanwa observes, “She is a woman with a measure of self-knowledge, without self deception and is *worthy of respect for that*.” (1985: 64; my emphasis added). Nestar demonstrates that prostitution can be performed without a loss of self-esteem, and indeed, arguably, as a means of achieving self-esteem, inasmuch as she gains economic independence and financial security in running her own ‘business’: “Even if she has to continue to operate as a prostitute, she does so with understanding and can, to some extent, define the terms on which she will prostitute herself” states Gaidzanwa (1985: 64). In many respects, through prostitution, Nestar resists, rather than submits to, patriarchal control of her sexuality. In view of Zimbabwe’s history of the regulation of black female sexuality, this is especially significant. Marechera's prostitute characters are usually strong, independent women who assert a degree of agency in redressing their economic marginalisation. Unlike in the dominant fiction of Zimbabwe, they are acknowledged for this and respected as such. Significantly, unlike Mungoshi’s Virginia, they are not punished for their ‘vice’.

There are moral discourses, nationalist discourses, and even feminist discourses which will always view prostitution as immoral, disgusting, degenerative, exploitative, disempowering or demeaning. Marechera destabilises all of these. One technique is to personally identify with the figure of the Whore, to inhabit the stigma of someone who like him is an outcast in society. Another is to disperse the stigma onto men as well as women, and onto nationalist ideals. He does this with often outrageous iconoclasm.

In *House of Hunger* he writes: “We were whores; eaten to the core by the syphilis of the white man’s coming” (Marechera 1978: 75). Here Marechera partakes in the moral discourse that equates prostitution with disease and national degeneration, but only to undercut it. In this image, contaminated by the sexually transmitted disease of colonialism, the emergent Zimbabwean nation (this is pre-independence) is rotting from venereal disease before it is even born. The passage is deeply unsettling to proud nationalists and an example of Marechera, at his most contentious, using the power of ‘Whore stigma’ to denigrate the ideals of nationhood.

With Marechera, most significantly, the nation is figured not as Mother but, subversively, as Whore. Again in *House of Hunger* he writes:

One day we followed a woman back to the township. There was nothing particularly interesting about her. It's just that we could see on the gravel road splotches and stains of semen that were dripping down her as she walked. Years later I was to write a story using her as a symbol of Rhodesia (49).

Unlike the depictions of Nestar and Julia, this is an image of degradation and disgust. The purpose though is to denigrate the ideals of colonialism and nationalism by throwing antithetical images at both these projects. Marechera 'uses' this woman to do so, which in itself may be seen as exploitative. However, the negativity is not so much directed at the woman herself but what she is held, momentarily, to symbolise. Most importantly, with Marechera the Whore is not locked into any particular system of signification, but changes gender and continues to shift through a range of negative connotations associated with her/him.

In terms of representation, the female characters move back and forth on the ladder of virtue and vice, so that, for example, they are mothers one minute and whores the next – or both simultaneously. In "My Arms Vanished Mountains", another rejected post-independence poem, contained in the posthumous *Cemetery of Mind* collection, Marechera talks about:

Writing angry poems to the rats in the attic
To the mothers, whores out of grim necessity,
To the fathers losing skin each day on the factory floor...

(Marechera 1992: 116)

Prostitution is not the mother's first choice of a career but her only choice. She is a whore, despite the new nation's ideals, through economic necessity, like the father who has to "lose skin" on the factory floor. Wives are cuckolding their husbands "out of grim necessity". Here Woman becomes mother, wife, adulteress and whore all at the same time – but the tone is empathetic rather than censorious.

In “the Journal” in *Mindblast*, Marechera explains the origin of the collapse, in his sensibility, of the mother – whore dichotomy:

The subject of women has tantalised me all my life; possibly because mother – so soon after father’s death – became a prostitute to keep the family going, I felt it keenly and I was all of eleven years old and death and prostitution were bludgeoning my mind (1984: 130).

Thus motherhood and prostitution become interchangeable images at an early stage in the young author’s mind. The experience contradicts nationalist mythology, of the kind we have seen in Staunton’s *Mothers of the Revolution* and Vera’s *Nehanda*, and produces an antagonism towards it. “It was then that I hated all notion of family, of extended family, of tribe, of nation, of the human race,” (130) states the disillusioned narrator. Hence, Marechera rejects ideologies enshrining Motherhood as a virtue.

Complicating the gendered signification of prostitution in the Zimbabwean context, Marechera’s narrator states: “[Father] used to whore around too, like every other husband in sight,” going on to topple a whole community of patriarchal figures from any possible moral high ground: “I would see a solemn congregation of husbands gathered together to receive the precious Christian wine called pennicilin” [sic] (1984: 130). Marechera ridicules moral discourse (which idealises motherhood and fatherhood) with sacrilegious imagery.

Nonetheless, it must be recognised that the author’s images of women are frequently perplexing. Interviewing the author about *Black Sunlight*, Veit-Wild addresses this question:

FV-W: But what I find striking is your treatment of women: their strength, self-confidence and power on one level; but your own sense of being threatened by the “Great Cunt” on another. The “Great Cunt”, imaged in the catacombs and tunnels at Devil’s End, becomes a symbol of an all-devouring and oppressive civilisation. Your book seems to vacillate between the fear of being engulfed and the longing to return to the “black sunlight” of the womb. There is a love/hate feeling towards women throughout your work.

DM I wouldn't say of women alone, I would say of mankind.
(Veit-Wild 1992: 219).

Marechera's representations of women (but not only women) are unstable, contradictory, and unpredictable. He destroys the Mother-Whore dichotomy in standard figurations but, as we will see, out of this demolition can arise new possibilities for gender identity and gender relations.

The frustration for feminism is the enormous potential of Marechera's writing to advance the cause of women's liberation, and yet its deeply disturbing nature, its misogyny, and its profound ambivalence - its resistance to political projects. Huma Ibrahim, who questions Marechera's gender politics, notes that "Each succeeding work that Marechera committed to paper is even less politically coherent than the last" (1990: 84). In *The House of Hunger* Ibrahim describes a war of the sexes, recounting how the narrator's brother beats Immaculate even though she is pregnant with his child. Also, when the narrator's first sexual encounter results in VD, "He lashes out at the woman who gave 'it' to him, creating a chasm between the sexes which seems to be filled only too quickly by violence, and not dialogue" (82). She thinks that "Marechera points out the vast areas of unresolved, silent resistance that lie between men and women, but he does not envision a way out of this impasse. He seems to believe that men and women cannot work together dialogically" (84-5). Ibrahim's point is valid, but her critique is not unique to Marechera by any means. Rather this is a salient feature of Zimbabwean writing generally. We see it in Tsitsi Dangarembga's play *She No Longer Weeps* (1987) with Martha abandoning all hope of dialogue with men. We see it in Shimmer Chinodya's *Can We Talk and Other Stories* (1998) – which despairs at the rift that exists in Zimbabwe between the sexes and makes a desperate plea for dialogue. We also see it in other contemporary writers such as Shakespeare Nyeremhuka (2000), who identifies a rift between the sexes in the modern family.

As Bryce argues, Marechera's representations of violence also need to be viewed as a comment on the profound abnormality of a specific socio-historic context. Viewed in this light, Marechera is a symptom. In the shocking spectacle of a public marital rape in *House of Hunger*, a township crowd simply watches an angry husband who "seemed to screw [his wife] forever – he went on and on and on and on until she looked like death" (Marechera 1978: 50). Commenting on the depiction of sexualised violence in his work,

Marechera comments: "Poverty can drive one into obscure sexual passions: if economically you cannot assert yourself, you try to assert yourself as a human being sexually" (Veit-Wild 1992: 13). This is given as an explanation for the numerous teenage pregnancies. He further explains:

[A]t that time black men were used to being the slaves of the whites, and the only slaves they had were their women. That's why the women were the ultimate victims of racism in this country. And I make no apology for the way I have depicted that very struggle in my books (Veit-Wild 1992: 13).

But the violence in *House of Hunger* is described, in an aside, as "not entirely one-sided, because the man next door tried it and was smashed into the Africans Only hospital by his up to then submissive wife" (1978: 50). Once again this confirms, with Marechera, that women are never simply passive victims.

In her reading of *Black Sunlight* Ibrahim speaks more approvingly of Marechera as she discovers a significant shift in emphasis, one sympathetic to a more hard-edged feminism. "One of the most important dialogic concerns of his second novel," she claims, "is that colonized men have to wait and learn from their women since the women wish radically to change gender relationships which will affect and revolutionize the sexo-political milieu" (85). Ibrahim claims Susan represents a progressive female radicalism because she "insists on standing apart from her sexualized marginal role that the patriarchal world continues to impose upon her, because the insights arising out of her own and the other women's critical consciousness challenge it." (87). A revolutionary, a demolitionist, and a grotesque subversion of the Mother Africa ideal, Susan says: "I think of myself as the sole and significant womb of this tottering nation. And I deal out death, not every nine months but every day, every hour, every instant" (Marechera 1980: 50). This is a radically alternative image of Woman, which is destabilising of patriarchy and its framework in the neo-colonial African context. It disturbs "The image of the mother [inviting] connotations of origins – birth, hearth, roots, the umbilical root," and the "'natural', identification of the mother with the beloved earth, the national territory," a predominant trope discerned in nationalist texts by Boehmer (1992: 232).

Susan is the opposite of what Uwakweh and Rooney describe as the “‘hard-working, all-enduring, self-sacrificing woman’ paraded by patriarchal Zimbabwean society and accepted by women themselves as the epitome of womanhood” (Uwakweh 1995: 76). In Marechera’s radically unstable narrative, she functions, partly, to undermine the controlling ideology of nationalism. Romanticised iconographies of African womanhood – despite their seemingly ‘positive’ images – can actually work against women’s emancipation, as has already been discussed. Marechera’s absolute irreverence for motherhood needs to be read in this context.⁹⁰ In *Black Sunlight* Marechera actually anticipates the problematic idealisation of motherhood under nationalism and destabilises this system of signification.

Ibrahim notes:

The Susans of a neo-political world can no longer be beaten up senselessly, like the generation of Immaculate [a long-suffering victim in *House of Hunger*]... Marechera is able to see that sexism and ownership are reactionary patriarchal concepts which can be destroyed only by women like Susan who is able to wreck sexual and rhetorical partitions in order to give birth to a ‘new history’ (Ibrahim 1990: 88).

Throughout her feminist critique (which follows the revolutionary sentiments of Cixous in “The Laugh of Medusa” [1981]), Ibrahim struggles to find synthesis in Marechera or to mobilise the writer in service of a tangible, progressive feminist project. Nevertheless, she concludes:

Marechera’s exposure of the patriarchal, counter-revolutionary designs which control society is a striking analysis of neo-colonial society. He is able to show the third world a certain vision, with the help of his female characters, when all hope seemed submerged in a cynical inertia (90).

⁹⁰ Marechera’s personal attitude towards motherhood was even more complex though. Before she got pregnant Dana Murray, a Canadian friend, recalls him saying: “I see all these women pushing babies in prams and I say to myself, is this what you do to a woman when you love her?” (Veit-Wild 1992: 325). His reaction to the news of her pregnancy “was really negative,” states Dana: “He just looked at Mike [her partner] and said ‘You bastard!’”, then later on when he was drunk, “Have an abortion” (325).

Ibrahim suggests Marechera is immensely important to the vision of egalitarianism in a future, revolutionary, dispensation. Her view can of course be challenged. Susan, as I allow, may not be the prototype for a third world feminist revolution in the opinion of other critics. Marechera's representations of women may be considered progressive for radical or socialist revolutionary feminism - but only to the point that Marechera's intellectual anarchism will permit. Nonetheless, *Black Sunlight*, published in the year of Zimbabwe's independence, is visionary in that it predicts the continuance of stubborn gendered structures long after the anti-colonial struggle for 'liberation'. The gender emancipation imagined in characters such as Susan is provocatively ahead of its time.

Violence is a striking motif and a technique in Marechera's writing but not unique to it. Rather it is an inescapable feature of much of the women's writing considered in this chapter. This important point is frequently overlooked in feminist analyses. In Dangarembga's case, most notably, violence represents a breakdown in dialogue and is represented, symbolically and shockingly, as the only viable course of feminist action. Typically, the Chimurenga literature and protest poetry considered also embrace militaristic metaphor, motif and strategy in the cause of women's emancipation. This includes Vera's *Nehanda*. It can be argued, therefore, in the broader context of women's literature, that violence is ultimately unavoidable. It cannot always simply be dismissed as masculinist in focus and appropriation; and – as Zimbabwean women's writing attests – it demands to be considered as a viable feminist writing strategy. In his interview of himself, Marechera says:

For a black writer the language is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duals with the language before you can make it do all that you want it to do. It is so for the feminists. English is very male. Hence feminist writers also adopt the same tactics (Veit-Wild and Schade 1988: 7-8)

In acknowledging the apparent intransigence of both racism and patriarchy in language, Marechera is clearly making an appeal for more dialogue with feminist writers on questions of strategy.

I have waited till towards the end of this chapter to examine Marechera's controversial representations of women, not only because it was crucial to first note the concerns of women writers, but also because I hoped to establish a context that would enable a more

careful analysis of his significance. This is not to give Marechera the final word on feminist writing strategy - far from it. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that the woman writer's "battle...is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" (1984: 49). If Zimbabwean women writers hold this to be true, then Marechera, as a precursor (along with other male writers), will increasingly become the subject of necessary feminist scrutiny. "In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialisation," state Gilbert and Gubar (49). There are signs, it seems, despite marginalisation and censorship, of such a process now underway in Zimbabwean women's writing.

Unfortunately Marechera has been sidelined in feminist discussions though, given the ambivalence of his writing, this is perhaps not surprising. He is pro-women's liberation but cannot be mobilised in support of a straightforward feminist politics. It seems he sets out to attack patriarchy only to recant and contradict his position later by slipping into apparent phallocentrism and misogyny - which he is nevertheless usually self-conscious about. He is unsettling and even close to offensive at times (depending on how he is read). And yet, I maintain, he remains crucial to feminist debates.

CHAPTER THREE:
QUEER SEXUALITY IN ZIMBABWEAN WRITING: MARECHERA'S
SIGNIFICANCE TO ANTI-HETERONORMATIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Refusing to sheathe the claws of his thought and sexuality, [Oscar Wilde] disdained harbours and found himself a spectacle thrown to the lions in the human arena. *Dorian Gray* is a novel I much admire. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the essays *De Profundis* show us what we missed because his contemporaries chose to drive their most intelligent man on to the rocks. The secret of homosexuality in E. M. Forster's life seems also to have stunted and finally silenced his talent, to our great loss. De Sade had to become at home in France's lunatic asylums before he could write the eloquent bile he understood to be in the arteries of the Parisian psyche. A host of men and women of ideas contrary to the game of actually seeing the emperor's clothes have always been and are being persecuted.

- Marechera, *The Black Insider* (1990 [1978]: 53)

I find it extremely outrageous and repugnant to my human conscience that such immoral and revulsive [*sic*] organisations, like those of homosexuals who offend both against the law of nature and the morals of religious beliefs espoused by our society should have any advocates in our midst and even elsewhere in the world. If we accept homosexuality as a right, as is being argued by the association of sodomists [*sic*] and sexual perverts, what moral fibre shall our society ever have to deny organised drug addicts, or even those given to bestiality, the rights they might claim and allege they possess under the rubrics of 'individual freedom' and 'human rights', including the freedom of the Press to write, publish and publicise their literature on them?

- Robert Mugabe, Inaugural Zimbabwe International Book Fair speech, following the banning of GALZ (quoted in *The Herald*, 2 August 1995)

Sexuality is perhaps hard to measure alongside established human rights. In our society it brings to the fore tensions between 'traditional' and 'modern' and their overlapping and sometimes different values. This society can only grow if it is adaptive and honest with itself, values which were fundamental to the liberation struggle...

We invite you to read these stories as a beginning – to learn about our lives, and thereby perhaps yours too.

- Preface to the first edition of *Sahwira: Being Gay and Lesbian in Zimbabwe* (1995: 5), intended to be fronted at the 1995 Book Fair.

In *The Black Insider* Marechera deplores a long history of homosexual persecution. Like his narrator, it seems Marechera was against the stifling of homosexual voices in

literature and sympathetic to the cause of gay liberation. His apparent gay-friendliness is also evident in the unpublished “Confessions of a Rusty Dread” where his narrator, yet another version of himself, writes: “A lot of my friends in London were either gay or lesbian” (n.d.: 25). This contrasts notably with Robert Mugabe’s now infamous anti-gay sentiments.

Marechera’s perspective is highly significant in that it precedes the heated debates surrounding homosexuality beginning at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in 1995, which have profoundly shaped sexual orientation discourse and literature emerging since then. To a fledgling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered movement, Marechera’s apparent moral support seems, at first sight, most welcome. But the author is typically complex and stubbornly resists being mobilised in service of this project, despite its progressive appeal. In fact, at times he seems to regress into homophobia. In *Black Sunlight*, for example, the narrator jibes that “a sodomite is one who has unnatural sexual intercourse with another of his own sex” (1980: 2). (I will return to these examples later, in my textual analysis.) By turn, Marechera is both sympathetic and unflattering in his representations of homosexuality – inconsistent once again. But one need not necessarily abandon queer critiques of Marechera’s writing in order to acknowledge his contribution to anti-heteronormative critical enquiry. This, a crucial point of my thesis, pertains to feminist discourse, as has been argued in Chapter Two.

Marechera’s writing was many years ahead of its time in its treatment of queer sexuality and demands attention for that reason. In fact it is crucial, I will argue, to the development of a queer critical discourse, currently missing from studies of Zimbabwean literature. This chapter is, in large part, an attempt to open discussion on the vitally important, thoroughly neglected, topic of queer sexuality. A detailed study of homosexuality in Zimbabwean literature is unprecedented. I write this in the context of the obvious oppression of a widely-disliked minority and the virtual non-existence an anti-homophobic, anti-heterosexist critical discourse in studies of Zimbabwean literature, where the tools of queer theory are largely unknown. Although there are some representations of homosexuality (more than in most national literatures from Africa, it

seems), the existing body of literary criticism is almost entirely silent on this subject.⁹¹ Effectively this complies with the retention of an oppressive status quo. Because it is so ingrained in cultural and literary discourse, heteronormativity demands a sharp riposte. My analysis is therefore necessarily, to a great extent, an anti-heterosexist, anti-homophobic endeavour.

Paradoxically, however, this project is one that will be problematised by the very author whose texts are its main focus of its attention. With the unstable and contradictory trope of queer sexuality, Marechera raises fundamental issues of personal identity, bringing complication and uncertainty to questions of sexual orientation. To engage with the author is to render a simplistic queer polemic impossible – and yet that may be precisely the usefulness of this exercise.

Firstly, I will attempt to bring clarity to debates by establishing theoretical frames, terms and definitions. I will then address the complicated socio-political context of sexual orientation issues in Zimbabwe, the reasons for homophobic repression, and the long silence on queer themes in the national literature. Following this, I will consider the importance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) personal narratives and the beginning of writing as the expression of alternative identities and a vehicle of resistance. I will then undertake a comparative analysis of the few existing representations of homosexuality in Zimbabwean literary texts. Alongside these I will trace a crisis of masculinity in recent texts, demonstrating a link. Finally, I will consider the significance of cross-dressing, focusing on Marechera's neglected play, *The Alley*, before drawing conclusions and commenting further on the author's significance.

⁹¹ The only other literary critic to engage significantly in an anti-heteronormative enquiry of Zimbabwean literature is Elleke Boehmer who, in her essay "Tropes of Yearning and Dissent: the troping of desire in Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga" (2003), examines implicit queerness. Her focus on women authors neatly complements mine, I suggest, which is concentrated on more explicit representations - only to be found, so far, in men's writing. This chapter is developed from a paper delivered at the "Versions and Subversions Conference on African Literatures" at Humboldt University, Berlin in May 2002.

1. Queer Theoretical Debates, Terms and Definitions

This chapter attempts to deploy concepts and terminology from queer theory that are relevant and useful to the specific Zimbabwean context. According to Tasmin Spargo, “In theory, queer is perpetually at odds with the normal, the norm, whether it is dominant heterosexuality or gay/lesbian identity. It is definitively eccentric, ab-normal” (1999: 40). Predictably queer theory exists at the margins of academic enquiry. I am aware this is a controversial project: allegations of foreignness and Eurocentrism (similar to those levelled against feminism and modernism) abound. Yet I see no reason for Zimbabwean literature and cultural studies, not to mention an oppressed minority, to forego the possible benefits of queer critical enquiry on the basis of such assumptions, despite this acknowledged risk

On the contrary, I contend it is incumbent on sceptics of the universalist tendencies in queer theory, including myself, to develop, where possible, perspectives catering to specific contexts and concerns, such as those of literature. In short, I maintain, it is not necessary to abandon critiques of queer discourse in order also to derive from its usefulness. Queer discourse is not monolithic: it hosts a variety of ongoing debates, accommodates a range of theoretical positions, and demonstrates an adaptive capacity.

As Rob Cover notes, it can be deployed effectively, including in postcolonial contexts, because it “permits perspectives from which to challenge the normative, including those sexualities which have been normalized in contemporary discourse: lesbian, gay, straight” (1999: 29). It also “opens a space for exploring diverse discourses that challenge heteronormativity while prompting examination of the constructionism of non-heterosexual sexual positions” (29). Queer theory, therefore, is potentially beneficial to non-heterosexuals, yet also capable of interrogating identity politics.

Queer is suitable for this discussion because it implies a questioning of identity politics and a problematisation of the assimilationist strategies of the LGBT drive for equality. As Spargo explains, queer, originally at least, “didn’t want to be assimilated or tolerated. This was a difference that meant to upset the status quo” (1999: 38). However, these are not necessarily the ambitions of most in the Zimbabwean LGBT community, to whom the term queer is largely unknown or considered inappropriate. Queer movements are somewhat distinct from the drive for LGBT rights. Nevertheless

for my purposes in this project, queer is indispensable to describing an identification, a sensibility, an activism, a lifestyle, representations and styles in literature, and a writing and reading practice. Moreover, Marechera's anti-heteronormative critique seems, at times, to be in dialogue with queer strategy and the term therefore appears apt for this study.

In their introduction to the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Abelove *et al* describe the "oppositional design" of gay and lesbian studies, "informed by the social struggle for the sexual liberation, the personal freedom, dignity, equality, and human rights of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men" (1993: xvi). However, in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner *et al* "go beyond calling for tolerance of gays and lesbians" and "assert the necessarily and desirably queer nature of the world. This extra step has become necessary," Warner explains, "if only because so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society" (Warner 1996: 286). Warner interrogates the premises of a heterosexual culture which "thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (286). Defiantly, *Fear of a Queer Planet* rejects the global ideology "that humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous" (287).

Challenging Warner from a materialist, frequently anti-western perspective, Cover claims, "The assumption that world-wide sexual subjects transgressing heteronormativity operate in the same way is a chief failing of much queer theory; it ignores the different inflections class and postcolonial ethnicity perform on the sexual subject" (1999: 31).

Theorisations of resistance to heteronormativity split along the lines of idealism, typified by Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1996), versus materialism, exemplified by Donald Morton's *The Material Queer* (1996). Marxist or neo-Marxist theorists have criticised poststructuralist theory as idealist, removed from bread and butter issues, and "inadequate for the exploration of class as an axis of differentiation and oppression" (Cover 1999: 30). Hence, Morton and other critics have initiated 'material queer' theory, which may prove more assimilable in the Zimbabwean context, I suggest, given the country's history of liberation struggle informed by Marxism, and the central place afforded to Marxian modes of analysis in Zimbabwean academic studies. Issues of class

are ultimately unavoidable in the study of sexual orientation and the emergence of LGBT identities and communities.

Although lesbian and gay studies and queer theory are broadly enabling, they can nevertheless be criticised for being western-dominated and insufficiently cognisant of the myriad alternative conceptualisations of sexuality and identity in the non-western world. However, as yet there have been few such analyses with regard to African writing. Chris Dunton's article "'Wheyting be Dat?' The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature" (1989) remains the most comprehensive contribution, despite the obvious need for more recent updates. Yet Dunton's analysis of queerness in Zimbabwean literature is relegated to a single footnote, where the lesbian episode in Marechera's *Mindblast* is acknowledged. In view of such an absence, this chapter will bring Zimbabwean representations, perspectives, and experiences in personal testimonies, as well as in literary texts, to the attention of African literary, cultural and queer studies, suggesting that the case of Zimbabwe is a crucially important consideration.

The South African Comparison

South African queer activist, Zackie Achmat notes, poignantly, that: "In the day-to-day battles of South Africa's fledgling queer movement, an emphasis on the instability of identity, culture and the tradition, is indispensable to the transformation of power relations that are established by colour, age, gender and class" (1993: 108). There are useful comparisons to be made between the respective movements of Zimbabwe and South Africa. The South African example of LGBT liberation struggle, which heralded the achievement of an equality clause in the new South African constitution, outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, remains hugely influential on the aspirations of the Zimbabwe LGBT movement. The principle of individual equality and the rejection of all forms of discrimination was key to the South African LGBT movement's success.

For understandable reasons GALZ, which represents the movement in Zimbabwe, has chosen to model its strategy to some extent on the South African success story.⁹² This is evident in their document submitted to the Constitutional Commission in 1999, where they argue: “A sexual orientation clause does not mean the destruction of Zimbabwean culture and an end to the African way of life; it means that the many different Zimbabwean cultures will be encouraged to recognise and accommodate our relationships” (GALZ 1999: 14). An equality agenda, implying the desire for assimilation, is also apparent in their mission statement:

The principle objective of GALZ is to build a democratic and accountable organisation and to strive for the attainment of full, equal rights and the removal of all forms of discrimination in all aspects of life for gay men, lesbians and bisexual people in Zimbabwe and to inform, educate, counsel and support people in matters relative to their health and well-being (*Kubatana* 2001).

These are laudable aims but they are noticeably unqueer in that they constitute a modest call for tolerance from wider Zimbabwean society rather than a fundamental restructuring of it. This is no doubt strategically sensible given that it would probably not serve the cause of Zimbabwean LGBTs, constitutionally far less empowered than their European, American or South African counterparts, to call for the abolition of heteronormative society as we know it. Strategically, such radicalism is thought to be counterproductive; lobbying within the system is considered an inescapable necessity.

Zimbabwean LGBTs are still negotiating with a society which has not yet reached a point where it is willing to debate, or even contemplate, a fundamental transformation in its structuration. This may be one reason Queer, with its radical and idealist political connotations, is not a term the movement in Zimbabwe has chosen to describe itself. However, one needs to note it is common practice for individuals and organisations to adopt a range of terms – homophile, homosexual, gay, LGBT, or queer – as seems appropriate to changing contexts.

⁹² The splinter organisation, Ngoni Chaidzo, “a lesbian group dealing with women of colour” and fighting “for women to be treated with respect and dignity,” also demands “equal rights for all” (Dube 1999: 17). It has so far refrained from separate political lobbying.

The LGBT movement in South Africa (which also hesitates to use the word queer to describe itself, despite more recognition and empowerment within civic society) has provided much material, moral and intellectual support. Yet inattention to the specificities of the Zimbabwean experience on the part of South African activists has also thrown up a difficulty in the regional queer discourse.

Take for example *Chimurenga*, an intelligent and progressively alternative South African magazine, which draws its name from the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. The May 2003 issue is somewhat misleadingly entitled “Black Gays and Mugabe”. Readers might hope for interviews and insights from Zimbabwean gays regarding life under Mugabe. Instead the relevant article is a discussion by three South African activists regarding Mugabe’s significance to the struggle against homophobia in the Southern African region as a whole. Zachie Achmat states, “I’m horrified that in this latest rounds [sic] of smashing democracy and civil society in Zimbabwe, that the gay community has been nowhere to be seen” (2003: 26). One might be forgiven for thinking that the Zimbabwean gay community has suddenly, frighteningly, disappeared. But actually Achmat means the South African gay community, which he considers one and the same: “when Mugabe attacked us the last time,” he says, “we were out on the streets. He could not come to Johannesburg. He was picketed at Jan Smuts. His hotel was picketed. We picketed the Zim embassies very regularly and then gave enormous support to GALZ...” (2003: 26). The group also express solidarity with Namibian queers suffering similarly under Sam Nujoma’s anti-gay campaign. Yet this lumping together, homogenising of southern African queer perspectives and anti-homophobic identifications (“Your struggle is our struggle”; “Mugabe’s attack on you is also an attack on us”) is problematic. Mugabe is of course a significant figure throughout the region but *Chimurenga*’s article South Africanises his significance. It is implied, quite unreflexively, that what is true for the South African struggle must also be true for the Zimbabwean struggle and vice versa – in fact for all ‘queer comrades’ throughout the Southern African region.

Mostly, for Zimbabweanists at least, this underscores the need for the kindling of queer dialogues focused on the specific Zimbabwe context, with attention to the pressing concerns of Zimbabwean LGBTs, which are at times similar yet also markedly different from those of their South African counterparts. I don’t argue for detachment. On the contrary I think LGBT support networks and queer discourse could benefit from *more*

regional dialogue. I criticise the current, unreflexive, South African domination of the discourse however. And I argue for more attention to local contexts of which neglected personal testimonies are an excellent barometer. The extraordinary circumstances of Zimbabwe (economic, historical and cultural) and the continued attacks on LGBTs, all of which have converged into a complicated milieu, necessitate attention to localised detail. Homogenisations and simplifications in queer discussions are ultimately unhelpful: a discourse facilitating analyses of conflict, contradiction and complication is required.

South African LGBT literature and literary discourse is the most prolifically published in the region, and therefore an obvious point of reference. The most significant collection of queer perspectives to date comes in the *Defiant Desire* anthology (1994), “a collage of essays, memoirs, polemics and pictures” (Gevisser and Cameron 1994: 3), which is commendable for its pioneering attempt to voice the diversity of gay and lesbian lives and struggles. The anthology aims:

to assist in establishing a climate in which South African lesbian and gay studies can emerge. The more that is published by and about gay South Africans, the more interest there will be, from publishers, from academic institutions, and from the reading public. Only a few years ago, working class and peasant tradition, labour history and women’s studies were largely ignored in South Africa; now these are at least taken seriously by publishers and the academic world. We have similar brave hopes for lesbian and gay studies (5).

These hopes are laudable. Yet the collection is framed by a number of assumptions that are in need of critique. It is implied in the title, and the structuring of the anthology to express unity of purpose despite LGBT diversity, that queer desire, in the face of homophobic oppression, transgresses the heteronormative status quo in an autonomous and necessarily progressive manner. This is not the case. As we will see with Marechera, queer sexuality is inconsistent in its transgressive capacity and it can just as easily throw up awkward, non-progressive contradictions. The case of ex-President Canaan Banana, queer and yet homophobic in his stance, illustrates this point graphically in Zimbabwe, as I will shortly discuss. Furthermore, as Morton states, “desire and pleasure are not simply to be acknowledged and celebrated (naturalized) but must instead be interrogated and critiqued (denaturalized and historicized), and their

production in the global series of social phenomena thereby understood" (1996b: 26). South African models of resistance in progressive LGBT literature are not simply and automatically transferable to the Zimbabwean context. As we will see, the roughly comparable project, *Sahwira: Being Gay and Lesbian in Zimbabwe*, sketches a somewhat different poetics of LGBT writing, which necessitates a different reading.

A useful contribution to regional queer literary discourse, more mindful of local contexts and historical specificity, is Rachel Holmes's "Identity Fictions: Queering Discourse on Race and Sexuality in South African Literary and Cultural Studies" (1997). Considering a range of anti-apartheid South African texts, Holmes discerns a hidden and recurring problematic, which is that:

sexual 'perversion' becomes an almost transcendental signifier of the dislocations of capitalism and colonialism entrapping the subjectivities of South Africa's dispossessed peoples. Sexual deviation is thus explained as a product of colonialism and apartheid, and sodomy becomes a figure for the rapacious penetration of colonial power (Holmes 1997: 33).

Holmes describes "a structural critical homophobia" in South African literary discourse "which privileges the normative integrity of stable heterosexual identities" (33). She persuasively demonstrates "the dangers of reading sexual 'perversion' as merely a transcendent dehistoricised signifier of colonial depredation" (33). Her observations hold true for Zimbabwe (which has a somewhat similar history of racial division and subordination) where the notion of 'homosexuality as colonial depredation' is a stubbornly recurrent assumption in cultural commentary and debate. This notion presents a persistent obstacle, I will argue, to more important dialogues regarding queer sexuality and its implications.

Terminology and the Zimbabwean Context

No single term seems entirely adequate to describe same-sex sexuality so I will use a variety in the course of this discussion. Reclaiming the word homosexual from its clinical and taxonomic connotations, I use it simply to describe same-sex desire or same-sex relations – terms which would be more apt if they were not stylistically cumbersome. I use the term gay reflexively because, despite its popularity, it

nevertheless fails to fully describe sexual diversity. Mostly, I refer instead therefore to a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered or LGBT minority. In spite of its progressive attempt at inclusiveness, this term also problematically excludes those who may demonstrate LGBT sympathies and sensibilities while nevertheless retaining an opposite sex attraction.⁹³ It does not sufficiently encapsulate the fluid and often inconsistent nature of sexual orientation and identification (and this becomes most noticeable in an analysis of Marechera). Hence Queer is a useful umbrella term because it registers resistance to heteronormativity while at the same time avoiding problematic subdivisions and the exclusion of those, such as 'queer heterosexuals', who do not quite fit LGBT categories.

My apparent inability to define an identity, a community, a lifestyle and a politics with consistent terminology means I am unable, ultimately, to stabilise it under one banner. This testifies to the complexity of the issues at hand. But the necessary shifts in terminology usage evidence the fundamental problematic of categorisation when it comes to questions of sexual orientation and identity and that is, to a great extent, what this chapter is all about. These questions and tensions are evident in the literature to be considered and the society that has given rise to it.

⁹³ There is also a further problem in that, as Judith Butler argues, "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (1996: 180).

2. The Battleground of the Text: Literature, Politics and Homosexuality

It is significant that a proposed exhibition of *literature* sparked a furious row and led to the politicisation of sexual orientation in Zimbabwe. In 1995 the GALZ stand at the International Book Fair was banned by the Zimbabwean government, amidst much publicity and controversy.⁹⁴ However, this marked the beginning of a fully-fledged LGBT movement in Zimbabwe. From the outset, the emergence of this movement and attempts to crush it have been staged, publicly, alongside books, literature, and the world of the text. This point, not yet fully explored, is important. The extraordinary events of the mid-1990s brought the relationship of sexual orientation to books and texts (and the circulation or censorship of these) into focus in an unprecedented manner. GALZ's attempted exhibition, and the publicity generated, demonstrated that non-heteronormative concepts of sexuality could be expressed and circulated through the medium of literature – in both fictional and non-fictional forms.

The Book Fair banning of GALZ was a watershed moment for Zimbabwean society regarding homosexuality, an issue that suddenly hit national and international headlines. Whereas few Zimbabweans had publicly discussed the subject previously, now it became unavoidable, thanks to a high-profile anti-gay campaign led by Robert Mugabe, who came to shape and symbolise a virulent new homophobic movement within pan-Africanism. Mugabe famously declared gays and lesbians “worse than dogs and pigs,” (GALZ 2002: iv), following an earlier declaration that homosexuality was “anathema to African culture” (*The Herald* 24 Jan 1994). He then called on the public to make citizens arrests in an effort to purge Zimbabwean society of the so-called ‘foreign vice’. Sodomy, defined as the “unlawful and intentional sexual relations *per anum* between two human males”, remains a criminal offence in Zimbabwe (GayZim 2003a).⁹⁵ The Church lent its wholehearted support to Mugabe's crusade, as did the media, which is mostly state-controlled. The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and national newspapers such as *The Herald*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Chronicle* and *The Sunday News* depicted homosexuals as corrupt, immoral, unAfrican, deviant, and perverse. *Moto* magazine (affiliated to the Catholic Church) went further, in September-October 1995.

⁹⁴ For a record of the Book Fair brouhaha, see Dunton and Palmberg (1996).

⁹⁵ A series of other “acts which may be perfectly lawful between male and female may well become criminal between two men. Thus cases of mutual masturbation, masturbation by one of the other, and various other combinations involving friction of the male genitals have all been found to constitute criminal conduct. Both consenting parties are liable to prosecution.” The law regarding lesbian sex is less clear. As yet there has never been a prosecution (GayZim 2003a). See also Phillips (1997: 476-7)

to allege gays were involved in Satanic cults, barbaric rituals, child molestation, ritual rape and murder: “Perverts swell satanic ranks” (9), “Get out of the closet so that we know who you are!” (11) and “Is there an inflation of Human Rights?” (15-17) featured as articles in an edition which seemed almost hysterical in its homophobia.⁹⁶

In the media, ‘gay peril’ superseded feminism and prostitution as the new threat to Zimbabwean society in yet another permutation of the moral and cultural hygiene discourse. Much of the fear, as the headlines suggest, was about an unseen menace.

The homophobic picture was of course deeply offensive to the vast majority in Zimbabwe’s LGBT community, but in the official media GALZ were not permitted the right of reply. Some individuals were prepared to do this despite the fact it had become increasingly dangerous to declare one’s sexual orientation in public. From January 1995 GALZ were barred from ZBC phone-ins and interviews and then they were not permitted to advertise counselling services in the national press. Overt attempts at silencing and censoring, it seemed, were the government’s anti-gay strategy.

Meanwhile, the controversy escalated in August 1995, in the sphere of international relations as seventy US congressmen petitioned Mugabe, protesting his alarming anti-gay invective and proposed persecutions. Mugabe replied: “Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves, out of Zimbabwe. We don’t want these practices here. Let them be gay in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. They (gays) will be sad people here” (*Behind the Mask* 2003a). Mugabe’s position also met “growing international resistance as European Union countries review[ed] their relations with Zimbabwe” (*Behind the Mask* 2003b). If the Zimbabwe government had intended to stifle homosexuals and their support network, then the opposite seemed to happen: the gay issue had never received so much publicity.

In 1996 the Censorship and Entertainments Control Act was invoked to once again bar GALZ from the International Book Fair. “This Act has been used to harass gay people,” states an informational bulletin on the *GayZim* website: Section 11 bans “any publication which is undesirable,” which is defined as “indecent or obscene or...offensive or harmful to public morals or likely to be contrary to public health” (*GayZim* 2003a). Underpinning the censorship legislation and the government’s use of

⁹⁶ Also see, for example, *The Herald* 2 August 1995; 12 August 1995; 16 August 1995; 19 August 1995.

it is, once again, is the discursive trope of cultural purity and national hygiene – the perceived threat to “public morals” and “public health”, the fear of social contamination through homosexual literature.

In an unprecedented act of resistance, GALZ challenged the government’s use of the Censorship and Entertainments Act, took their case to the High Court and won the right to exhibit at the 1996 Book Fair. In fact GALZ’s literature, mostly of an educational nature, sought to redress misinformation and misrepresentation: it was not nearly as provocative as the government had made it seem. But it was set alight and the lives of the GALZ task force were threatened by homophobic youths, while the police simply stood and watched. It seemed if the government and the ‘moral majority’ it claimed to represent could not suppress GALZ by legal means, then illegal anti-gay actions would become the order of the day. The empty GALZ stand in 1995 and the blazing books in 1996 are now indelible images in the LGBT struggle for liberation in Zimbabwe – enduring reminders of the central importance of texts and of the ongoing battle against forms of censorship. Materials, including leaflets and literature, were later seized from the GALZ Harare premises in several unauthorised raids.⁹⁷

But cracks began to emerge in the anti-gay camp when, shockingly, in 1996, the ex-President Rev. Canaan Banana, was accused of homosexual rape. After a lengthy and much publicised trial, he was convicted in 1998 on eleven counts of sodomy and indecent assault.⁹⁸ Homosexuality was suddenly exposed at the very apex of ‘respectable’ Zimbabwean society. It was a dramatic, unsettling contradiction to the narrative of heteronormativity – a ‘gay-free’ Zimbabwean culture - that Mugabe, the Church and the media had sought to promote. Still, when Banana later condemned homosexuality as deviant, abominable and wrong according to the scriptures and African culture, the government was able to resume its anti-gay campaign.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Later the Programmes Manager was falsely accused of sexual assault in a case that was much-publicised in the local press but thrown out of court for complete lack of evidence. On 26 March, 2001, *The Standard* reported police had raided the organisation’s Bulawayo offices, also spuriously justifying the action under the Censorship and Entertainments Act (Afrol.com 2001). See “Specific instances of discrimination against lesbians and gay men in Zimbabwe” (GALZ 1999: 19-22).

⁹⁸ See *The Guardian* (London, 2 June, 1998): 15. Having been unwell for some time, Banana died on 10 November 2003. The complete erasure of Banana’s homosexuality is remarkable in Mugabe’s eulogy on 11 November in *The Herald*.

⁹⁹ Banana was nevertheless defrocked by the Methodist Church. See *The Financial Gazette* 21 January 1999.

The Banana scenario became complicated and put the LGBT movement's stance to the test. Unflinchingly, they refused to support him in view of his hypocritical homophobic pronouncements and the allegations of homosexual rape (which GALZ, it made clear, emphatically condemns). Problematically, however, since there is no distinction between consensual and non-consensual homosexual acts under current sodomy law, the charge of rape was never ascertained (Phillips 1999: 197-198). Nevertheless, GALZ publicly dissociated itself from Banana from the start: he could never be held as a positive role model despite his previously esteemed position. Although these dramatic disclosures effectively destroyed the myth of homosexuality's non-existence in black culture, they also revealed, awkwardly for a LGBT movement trying to counter negative images in the media, that same-sex transgressions are not necessarily progressive: in this case coercion and duress were alleged. Banana's case scuppered any credence to a simplistic oppositional politics of 'homosexual victims' versus 'heterosexual oppressors': in fact the opposite was alleged to be true.

In the end, the Banana affair proved only a moment of respite in a relentless anti-gay campaign. At the funeral of the Chief Editor Chikerema of *The Herald*, in April 1998, Mugabe once again urged the press to write negatively about homosexuality and a spate of anti-GALZ articles ensued (GALZ 1999: 19).

Meanwhile, Mugabe's anti-gay stance had mobilised UK gay rights activist, Peter Tatchell, into action. In 1997, when Mugabe was drinking tea in London's Westminster Central Hall, "Tatchell, posing as a cameraman, broke ranks, approached Mugabe and introduced himself as a supporter of ZANU...during the liberation struggle" but then said "I am campaigning for lesbian and gay human rights" (*Behind the Mask* 2003c). Their next encounter, in October 1999, was even more dramatic. With Chris Morris and Alistair Williams from the radical gay rights organisation, OutRage!, Tatchell ambushed Mugabe outside his London hotel, attempting a citizens arrest under international law, though citing not gay rights violations but the torture of two journalists and the massacre in Matabeleland. A diplomatic row ensued but, according to Keith Goddard, for the Zimbabwe LGBT movement there were "a number of positive outcomes, the most significant being that GALZ was invited to appear on national television for the first time" (2003c). Also, the organisation "collected over 100 newspaper articles on the subject of lesbian and gay issues and the diplomatic incident in London," and discovered "Publicity is our best weapon so far...The action of

Outrage! has also strengthened our credibility within the general human-rights movement in Zimbabwe and allowed us to forge broader coalitions” (2003c). And yet GALZ also sought to distance itself from Tatchell and Outrage! - who could be accused of appropriating the Zimbabwe issue into a universalist (yet western-led) queer agenda. Goddard adds: “As a general policy, we prefer to fight our own battles...Psychologically, too, we feel that we should take pride in controlling our struggle” (2003c).

A backlash to Mugabe’s international humiliation was perhaps inevitable. The Zimbabwean President refused to accept the British government’s apology, instead accused the Blair government of setting ‘gay gangsters’ upon him and gave the dispute a bizarre twist, according to Dumisani Dube, by “calling the UK Minister for Africa, Peter Hain ‘the wife of Peter Tatchell’” (*Behind the Mask* 2003d). The LGBT community felt the brunt of Mugabe’s homophobia during the controversial 2000 and 2002 elections. Seeking re-election on an anti-white, anti-British, anti-homosexual ticket (and conflating all three in a highly problematic manner) Mugabe stated, on 2 February 2002, “I have people who are married in my cabinet. Blair has homosexuals,” (with apparent amnesia about the Banana brouhaha in Zimbabwe), and added his familiar bestial analogy: “We are saying they do not know biology because even dogs and pigs know biology. We can form clubs, but we will never have homosexual clubs. In fact we punish them” (*Behind the Mask* 2003e). In contrast, the Movement for Democratic Change leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, had stated, before the 2000 elections, that the MDC “will not be legislating against those who have a different sexual orientation. They will always be welcome as long as they respect the laws and public policy of Zimbabwe” (*Behind the Mask* 2003f). By now homosexuality was well and truly on the map as a political issue.

In April 2002 another stunning contradiction rocked the government’s anti-gay campaign when the Chief Executive Officer of the ZBC, Alum Mpofu, was “caught with his pants down outside a Harare nightclub” (*Behind the Mask* 2003g) and investigated by the police for allegedly having sex with another man in a public place. Having sustained so much abuse from the ZBC (perhaps the most powerful instrument of homophobic propaganda), GALZ took this opportunity to ‘out’ its hypocritical overseer, in a statement released to the independent press on 4 April 2002:

GALZ has been fully aware of Mr. Mpofu's homosexuality for some time now and sees no reason to withhold this information in order to protect the man's honour. Clearly he has none. Mpofu...has lent support to and benefited from a racist and homophobic system...His betrayal is not that of an active campaigner against homosexuals but that of a deep silence and quiet acquiescence to state-led physical and psychological violence against defenseless minorities, including lesbian and gay people (*Behind the Mask* 2003g).

This was a protest against collusion in the production of harmful distortions of the truth by the powerful medium of the ZBC. Homosexuality was exposed as a contradiction at the heart of Zimbabwe's heteronormative image-making machinery with this controversial 'outing'.

Image-making and image-breaking in imaginative literature

The Mugabe government has long been engaged in a project of trying to construct a certain image of Zimbabwean society, emphasising certain attributes and denying others. State-sanctioned homophobia presents "a broader goal", suggests Phillips (and many others): "of fostering a stronger sense of a normative national identity through the censure of marginal groups and the reinvention of tradition" (1997: 485). The state-controlled media (what Althusser would term 'the communications ISA) has been the most obvious instrument in this project. But a broad range of other texts, imaginative literature included, are also important to national image-making. Official narratives have been propagated (or resisted) over the years through all of these texts.

A current queer example is "Big Pig", an article posted to *Behind the Mask's* website. It refers to George Orwell's famous political satire, *Animal Farm*, which is widely read in Zimbabwe, and has been serialised in the independent press (now subject to stringent censorship legislation) for its relevance to the current political crisis:

Zimbabwe is Mugabe's *Animal Farm* where the pigs are more equal than everyone else and where the pigs own the land and determine their distribution!
[sic]

As Big Pig, our President determines who shall belong on his national farm, Zimbabwe gays and lesbians do not qualify. To use his own words from 1995 ‘they are worse than dogs and pigs’. So, to mix our metaphors slightly, ‘there we have it from the horse’s mouth’. Big Pig confirmed this in Namibia in 1998 when he said everyone had rights on His Zimbabwe farm – except gays!...

The author signs himself as “Anthony Grainger (Order of Jerominus The Pig).” (*Behind the Mask* 2003h). This exemplifies fiction as a site of resistance to the official national narrative, challenging homophobic and heterosexist exclusions.

We saw in Chapter One how Lessing and Marechera use writing to contest normative racial representations, and in Chapter Two how normative gender relations are similarly being contested. Here we see fiction being further eroded as a ‘normalising’ implement of national consensus, with resistant forms becoming more directly agitational. Fiction is in fact crucial to the Zimbabwean nation’s concept of itself. As Marechera states in *The Black Insider*, “Fictions become more documentary than actual documentaries” (1990: 36). The above adaptation of *Animal Farm* plays with the concept of fact being ‘queerer’ than fiction. Here Silverman provides a useful concept. She proposes “that we think of the primary agency of social consensus as a ‘dominant fiction’”, which is “a wealth of representational and signifying practices” (1992: 28):

The dominant fiction not only offers the representational system by means of which the subject typically assumes a sexual identity, and takes on the desires commensurate with that identity, but forms the stable core around which a nation’s and period’s ‘reality’ coheres (41).

A particular concept of sexuality is central to the workings of the dominant fiction. The ideology of nationhood hinges on a consistent, fixed and uniform idea of sexuality, and texts are crucial not just to the expression but also the construction of sexual identities. Significantly, “the dominant fiction presents the social formation with its most fundamental image of unity, the family,” notes Silverman: “The collectivities of community, town, and nation have all traditionally defined themselves through reference to that image” (42). This of course is a heteronormative image.

Imaginative writing has a special significance in the reproduction of this image and state structures have sought to manipulate literature, promoting or censoring, selecting or deselecting it for school syllabi, according to its 'appropriateness'. In fact, literature can be seen, in Louis Althusser's terms, as yet another ISA. Referring to Althusser's classic essay on the subject, Silverman explains that "Ideological belief...occurs at the moment when an image which the subject knows to be culturally fabricated nevertheless succeeds in being recognised or acknowledged as 'a pure, naked perception of reality'" (16). Culturally and politically fabricated images are most noticeable when, as has been pointed out in my introduction and in Chapter One, literature is exploited to affirm a racist ideology. But feminist writers and critics, as I have established in Chapter Two, interrogate the dominant fiction for naturalising an oppressive patriarchal ideology.

We return here to the significance of positive and negative representations. If as Gaidzanwa claims, "A negative image [of women] delegitimises their struggle for fundamental rights and freedoms" (1985: 8), then the same would apply to negative images of the LGBT community. I have shown that non-literary texts in national circulation since 1995 are quite obvious in their intention to delegitimise the LGBT struggle for basic rights and freedoms. This is not to disregard the significant dissenting voices in the independent press, but these tend to make a rather modest case for tolerance rather than equality.¹⁰⁰

As regards literary texts, the issue is not so much negative images but an absence of images. Prior to the 1990s, there are no representations of same-sex desire and relationships in the body of Zimbabwean literature, apart from the writing of Marechera (who, exceptionally, began to write about homosexuality in the 1970s). At this point it is worth noting that images of homosexuality in white Rhodesian literature are also few and far between, and unflattering for the most part. Where homosexuality is addressed, it largely signifies effeminacy, deviancy, perversity, corruption or the threat of racial and cultural contamination.

For example, in his Ballantyne quartet, Wilbur Smith characterises Cecil Rhodes as somewhat effeminate and prone to disastrous lovers' tiffs with boyfriends, one of which - it is suggested - results in the burning down of the Groote Schuur Estate. Depicted as a

¹⁰⁰ See for example, coverage of the 1995 Book Fair and commentary on GALZ's banning in *The Financial Gazette* and *The Zimbabwean Review*.

flaw in his character, Rhodes's homosexuality causes serious setbacks to his otherwise 'manly' ambitions. In *A Time to Die*, Robert Early portrays a duplicitous Hungarian spy running a brothel for Rhodesian soldiers, while also working for the guerrillas, as 'queer', i.e. deviant and perverse. Gertrude Page, meanwhile, suggests that the bachelors who live together in *The Wilderness* are more than just friends. It is implied that the couple are queer and guilty of "white peril"- tempting the possibility of interracial sex, a serious transgression in Southern Rhodesian society, examined in Chapter One.¹⁰¹

The complete absence of queer images – which is the most common scenario in literary texts - tends to reinforce equally problematic perceptions of non-existence or irrelevance. If imaginative literature purports to hold a mirror up to society, then it is not unreasonable for the LGBT community to expect to see itself somewhere, somehow reflected in that mirror. In fact, total invisibility can be more disturbing than homophobic distortions because in this instance the LGBT reader is presented with a mirror in which s/he never appears. The implication is s/he does not exist, does not matter, is of no consequence, or is simply unmentionable. His or her presence therefore goes unacknowledged by a dominant fiction seemingly determined to ignore the reality of same-sex desire or intimate same-sex relationships. Of late, however, following the anti-gay campaign in which it has participated, the dominant fiction in Zimbabwe has unwittingly produced rather than repressed categories of homosexuality. Homophobic texts necessarily admit a homosexual presence and, to this extent, concede space to the possibility of alternative sexual identities even though the dominant fiction marks these as perverse. This is a highly significant development, which I will comment on shortly.

Though there are very few representations of homosexuality in Zimbabwean literature, to LGBT readers the silences can be deafening and the absences unnervingly conspicuous. LGBT readers, at least, will never be convinced by the myth of their non-existence and will always be on the lookout for hidden hints, double meanings, etc. as they pry beneath the façade of the dominant heteronormative fiction. This is where queer theory can prove useful. As Jonathan Culler explains, "Queer theory has argued that the heterosexual subject is constructed through the repression of possible homosexuality." (1997: 111). There will always be cracks in even the most insistently heteronormative of narratives, which invite a critical reading 'between the lines'.

¹⁰¹ My thanks to Anthony Chennells for these insights.

Readers alert to sexual diversity recognise that since same-sex desire, love and relationships have been carefully concealed in real life, it is not altogether surprising (though disappointing) that the mirror of literature attempts to do exactly the same.

Erasures and silencings

But why the silence one might ask? State censorship is of course one factor and all of the above demonstrates a government fervently trying to suppress the circulation of LGBT literature (of any sort) but this has ultimately proven counter-productive. “Since August 1995, there has been a considerable and deliberate increase in the visibility of black men and women actively identifying themselves as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’” notes Phillips (1999: 473). (This was precipitated by publicity generated by the banning of GALZ from the Book Fair.) Conservatism in the publishing industry might be another factor. Many of Marechera’s queer representations have been effectively withheld from the reading public. For example, *The Black Insider* was written in the late 1970s but not published until 1990. *Killwatch*, a clearly homoerotic play, was not published till 1994 (in the *Scrapiron Blues* miscellany); and *Confessions of a Rusty Dread* (n.d.), arguably his queerest post-independence text, remains unpublished.

Chenjerai Hove pinpoints perhaps the most significant factor, which he terms “cultural censorship”:

As we grew up, we were told to be wary of a certain two men who always wanted to play with us and offered us sweets. Only now do we realise that they were gay. My relatives would turn in their graves at the thought. To write about those characters is to let slip the ugly face of the village. Every village wants to be portrayed as beautiful, a place into which you were lucky to be born. Thus cultural pride becomes cultural censorship (2002: 10).

Although Hove is gesturing towards more openness about homosexuality, his general assumption that gayness represents a blight and a perversion of sorts, “the ugly face of the village”, is highly contentious. There is no necessary connection between homosexuality and child-molestation. They are not, as Hove implies, one and the same thing. The vast majority of homosexuals have no desire to seduce children with sweets, nor are they any more prone to child-abuse than heterosexuals. Hove seems to be

arguing here that homosexuality is a universal pathology. Nevertheless, on desire, love and sexuality in Zimbabwe, Hove asks pertinent questions, which I considered also in Chapter One: “Can we write of the body of a woman or of a man, in all its sexuality? We cannot do so because people in this part of the world will say, this does not happen in our culture. Isn’t culture a lie with which we all concur?” (2002: 10-11).

Hove’s critique of the culture of silence on love and desire (ironic in view of his role in rejecting Marechera’s love and erotic poetry for publication), here applicable to all sexual representations, is relevant to what the historian Marc Epprecht terms ‘The ‘unsaying’ of indigenous Homosexualities’. We can see this across a range of discourses – historical and anthropological. Epprecht criticises these for heterosexist blindspots and biases, suggesting especially that historical narratives have complied with this ‘unsaying’ to construct an image of the past which presumes same-sex desire, love and intimate relationships did not occur within African communities. Where they are impossible to deny, they are often accounted for by ‘decadent European influences’ or the depraved conditions produced by the socio-economics of racial capitalism.

But, as Hayden White’s observes: “the study of history is...never innocent, ideologically or otherwise” (1987: 82). “Historiography is, by its very nature, the representational practice best suited to the production of the ‘law-abiding’ citizen” (87). Historical narratives therefore represent an important site of contest for issues of sexuality. Since it is now commonly accepted that sexuality has a history and is constructed and contingent, it is an entirely legitimate exercise for an anti-heterosexist critical enquiry to hold dominant historiographic practice to account. Hence Epprecht criticises even the most esteemed historians for drawing a picture of the past that ignores, erases, invalidates or misinterprets the existence and relevance of same-sex relationships. These include Charles Van Onselen, Ian Phimister and Terence Ranger (Epprecht 1998: 631-642). In the *Zimbabwe Review*, Epprecht states “Ian Phimister has a striking blind-spot. Or is it an active feeling of revulsion which makes him so studiously avoid a certain particular topic – homosexuality among African mine workers” (Epprecht 1997). Phimister responds, censoriously, that Epprecht’s piece “appears to be a work of fiction, an entertaining parody of political correctness,” and that “foam-flecked imputations of homophobia are no real substitute for reasoned argument” (Phimister 1997: 31). The aggressive tone in this reply betrays an unwillingness to consider same-sex relationships as part of the fabric of Zimbabwean

history and to take these seriously. In an all too familiar heteronormative gesture, it also attempts to delegitimise queer critical enquiry.¹⁰²

Anthropological practice has been equally problematic. Michael Gelfand noted quite confidently, on the basis of minimal research and a contentious methodology, that:

The traditional Shona have none of the problems associated with homosexuality [so] obviously they must have a valuable method of bringing up children, especially with regards to normal sex relations, thus avoiding this anomaly so frequent in Western society (1979: 201).

Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe observe that twentieth century anthropological literature is often pitched “in response to Victorian rhetoric of savagery and primitivism” and that it has instead “embraced functionalism and emphasized the integration, morality and coherence of African societies – thereby redeeming them from an image of anarchy for their Western readers” (1998: xvi-xvii).

The denial of same-sex acts occurring in traditional African societies is easily refuted. “For instance,” Phillips notes, “in Zimbabwe oral historians have suggested that sexual activity between children of the same sex was expected as normal behaviour, particularly around the age of puberty, but that thereafter ‘it was frowned upon’” (1997: 476):

What is clear is that to suggest that homosexual acts are against ‘African Culture’ is to misrepresent Africa as statically monocultural, to ignore the richness of differing cultural constructions of desire, and in suggesting a totalized notion of African culture, one simply replicates much of the colonial discourse on African sexuality (474).

¹⁰² See also Achmat’s allegations of erasure in Van Onselen’s work (1993:98).

Politicisation: the Emergence and ‘threat’ of LGBT Identities

In its history of the Zimbabwean gay liberation struggle, the *GayZim* website states that:

After Mugabe’s hate speech two important things happened. The first was that the gay issue was firmly and forever placed on the national agenda. There was no way we were ever going to be ignored again. The second was that the hitherto mainly invisible black homosexual population of Zimbabwe was outraged to be told by their President that they did not exist, and if they did, they were a product of corruption by foreigners. Suddenly, there was a common cause to rally for. Gays fought back. We refused to back off. The 1995 Book Fair was our Stonewall (*GayZim* 2003b)

The writer of course refers to the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 that sparked off the global gay liberation movement. In case this seems like a wholesale purchase of Western gay identity, the commentator is cognisant to Africanise the concept: “Zimbabwe is not a monolithic cultural entity,” he states: “If one looks at Great Zimbabwe, it is made up of millions of small stones. In the same way, Zimbabwean society is made up of millions of different people from dozens of different cultures.” (*GayZim* 2003b). Zimbabwe’s more culturally specific ‘Stonewall’, in other words, is also the powerful national symbol of the ancient Great Zimbabwe ruins.

Mugabe’s campaign did not quash homosexuality at all. “Membership of GALZ doubled amongst the black community owing to advertising campaigns in the independent media,” notes ILGA (the International Lesbian and Gay Association) in their 2000 report (*Behind the Mask* 2003i). Helped by international publicity, GALZ expanded its contacts abroad: “Poliyana Mangwiro...travelled through 13 European countries, the United States and Canada on a speakers’ tour designed to raise awareness about the situation facing lesbians and gay men in Southern Africa” (*Behind the Mask* 2003i).

In the meantime, publicised queer resistance continued to meet Mugabe when he travelled abroad. Tatchell attempted a second citizen’s arrest of the President in Brussels in 2001, though he was severely beaten up by bodyguards. In February 2003, activists from ACT UP and the Pink Panthers (queer organisations) were joined with

other anti-Mugabe protesters in Paris, where they “blasted fog horns and threw paint at the Zimbabwean Embassy [and] staged demonstrations outside Mugabe’s hotel” (*Behind the Mask* 2003j). The French government had controversially defied European Union sanctions by granting Mugabe permission to attend the Franco-African summit.

Zimbabwe’s independent press (also opposed to Mugabe’s anti-democratic regime) has, of late, become more sympathetic, less homophobic. Lee Berthiaume, who writes “Gays Soldier On” for the *Zimbabwe Standard* on 15 September 2003, gives an informative account. LGBT organisations in Zimbabwe, he notes, had their roots in the close-knit mostly white party-scene of the 1970s and 1980s. However, GALZ, which formed in 1990, now has about six hundred registered members, mostly black, and is “in contact with close to 5000 other homosexuals in the country” (*Behind the Mask* 2003k). Independent of GALZ, “a website titled *GayZim* has been in place since 1999, offering legal advice, health tips and providing a classified service for members to meet. According to its organiser, there are several hundred people on its mailing list” (2003k).

A variety of texts, including those displayed on the internet, and in the independent media, continue to play an important role in circulating information considered a threat to the prevailing social order but essential to democratisation and free expression. LGBTs, with their support network, are reclaiming discursive space in the national narrative and in discussions of culture from which they have until recently been erased and excluded. The consequence has been an ever-increasing awareness of LGBT identities. In turn this has rattled the heteronormative status quo. As GALZ observes:

Gays are rated worse than feminists. The very presence of lesbians and gay men who identify themselves openly undermines the rigid patriarchy that prevails in Zimbabwe. Gay identity challenges traditional society and questions whether it is valid, necessary, desirable, practical or possible for a whole nation to conform to one set of cultural values (GALZ 1999: 22).

It becomes increasingly evident that it is not so much the practice of homosexuality that disturbs the patriarchal establishment (because this has occurred, albeit mostly discreetly, within African societies - like every other society in the world - since time immemorial) but the confident assertion of *LGBT lifestyles* and *LGBT identities*. What

has changed on the social, cultural, political landscape of Zimbabwe is not the arrival of same-sex relations but the emergence of a radical new broad-based assertion of *selfhood* based on sexual-orientation.

Ironically, it was not GALZ but Mugabe who most effectively, with the powerful state-controlled media, spread the idea of personal identity based on sexual orientation to every corner of the country. The majority in Zimbabwe had never had to think of themselves as either homosexual or heterosexual until sexuality was politicised in such a categorical way in the mid-1990s. In his numerous anti-homosexual speeches, Mugabe purported to be defending traditional African culture from a foreign 'vice'. But such a rigid distinction between heterosexual and homosexual identities never existed in pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies, where - all the evidence suggests - sexuality was envisaged entirely differently.¹⁰³ It is here that Mugabe's homophobia loops back in on itself in an extraordinary paradox - actually producing that which it tries to obliterate, continuously propagating the notion of LGBT identities with each homophobic utterance, and actually galvanising the LGBT liberation movement with every statement of adversity to it. Zimbabwe now lives with the supreme irony that it is thanks to Mugabe, much more so than to gay activism, that homosexuality is on the national agenda and sexual orientation is now firmly established as a marker of personal identity.¹⁰⁴ It has also become, with Mugabe's anti-Western speeches, intractable from international relations.

The Zimbabwean experience lends credence to Foucault's theory that sexuality (in this case homosexuality) is produced rather than repressed in society. Power/knowledge has now produced a situation where one is defined by one's sexual preference, one's conformity to the heterosexual 'norm', or one's 'deviance' from it. Of the nineteenth century, Foucault states, "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (1978: 43). Similarly, dominant (mostly homophobic) discursive practices, with their access to mass media, have produced the homosexual as a certain 'species' in popular discourse, in contemporary Zimbabwe. The result, since 1995, is that there has been a sea change in national awareness with regard to sexual orientation. This, I suggest, will inevitably draw the issue of homosexuality ever closer to the surface in popular culture and that will be reflected in mainstream Zimbabwean

¹⁰³ See the broad array of essays in Murray and Roscoe (1998).

¹⁰⁴ My thanks to Oliver Phillips for elaborating this point.

literature. In fact it already has, as we will see from the post-1995 literature to be analysed in this chapter. Firstly, however, the ‘unsaying’ of homosexualities, described by Hove, Epprecht and others, underscores the profound significance of the emergence of actual LGBT writing, which speaks for itself. I contend it is of paramount importance to consult with these voices. The personal testimonies I now consider are illustrative of Zimbabwean LGBT experiences and identities.

3. LGBT Narratives: *Sahwira: Being Gay and Lesbian in Zimbabwe*¹⁰⁵

The *Sahwira* anthology, consisting of personal testimonies, poetry and short stories, compiled by GALZ project-workers over a two year period, prior to Mugabe's 1995 anti-gay campaign, marks the beginning of an LGBT minority attempting to write itself into a past and a present from which it and its experiences have been erased. It became all the more significant, after the book fair brouhaha, when it was alleged homosexuality was 'unAfrican'. *Sahwira* is the Shona term for a relative or close family friend with whom one can confide about anything. It is believed that the secret of homosexuality is often disclosed in such relationships. Although the narratives challenge homophobia and heterosexism, they do so, for the most part, within the *sahwira* tradition of intimacy. Accordingly, most of the testimonies are individual and deeply private, rather than public, in their tenor.

The *Sahwira* collection was intended to serve several functions. According to Andrew Morrison, a project worker who communicated with me by email in 1996, its aims were:

to show we are part of existing social, economic and cultural environments, to begin a discussion and a process of claiming our own narratives in a media world in which they do not appear, to represent at the book fair a collection of real open and honest stories to a broad audience which has little information and experience of gay and lesbian lives, [and] to have [this] in PRINT for ourselves, to make more concrete our hidden and sometimes very difficult existences.

Significantly, Morrison identifies words and printed text as a crucial site the LGBT community can stake a claim to in the battle against marginalisation and oppression. *Sahwira* has been joined by *The Galzette* (a quarterly magazine of LGBT news, views and creative writing – the title of which is obviously a playful, 'queering' adaptation of the word gazette). There are also signs from the LGBT community, independent of GALZ, of a foray into the burgeoning medium of internet sites: examples are *GayZim*, *Lavenderlinks*, *Behind the Mask* and *Kubutana*. Alternative viewpoints in these texts

¹⁰⁵ This section draws on previous research, presented at an Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) conference (Shaw 1996b).

counteract the negative, often dehumanising, images of gayness generated by the official media.

Textual production has been extremely important to the LGBT liberation movement and the expression of alternative identities. Much of this has been, necessarily, in the form of public anti-homophobic statements. But the personal testimonies in this collection bring a human face to LGBT struggles. To write or to give oral testimony is to create one's own narrative, to reassert authority over one's own life, to enact a certain agency.

The preface to the first edition explains:

Sahwira is the first collection of personal accounts of gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe. It aims to present some aspects of a diverse, sometimes hidden group of people... We are black, white, coloured, Indian, men and women - Shona and Ndebele and English speaking - religious, party goers - urban and rural - married and single - we all have a voice. Here we speak up, sometimes with trepidation, but with courage. We have not bleached away the problems of our lives. We offer these too. But we also celebrate our diversity and assert that as people we too have human rights (1995: 5).

In view of the long history of silencing to which they are a reaction, and the context of widespread ignorance about homosexual experiences in Zimbabwe, I quote at length from a selection of these narratives. The contributors, mostly anonymous in the 1995 first edition, are now nearly all named in the newly annotated 2002 edition. This partly reflects increased confidence in 'coming out', but also, sadly, the fact that several are now deceased, having become victims of the devastating AIDS pandemic.

“Respect and Dignity”

Pangi Nyathi begins by refuting the myth of non-existence:

Being black, middle class, Zimbabwean and gay is not easy. On the one hand, there is one's sexuality - one's homosexuality - and on the other hand there is

the law and society. The society says that there are no homosexuals in Africa. The truth is there are.

But being black, gay, and Zimbabwean is not because of any influence from Europe or western countries. And being from a successful professional family is also difficult because of the values placed on doing what is expected. It has always been a belief in Zimbabwe that it is only whites who have sex with same sex partners and that blacks are only involved for the sake of money. There are other stories we don't hear. I have been in a relationship with another middle class man for 10 years. In our society. As black Zimbabwean men...(Sahwira 2002: 2).

Pangi goes on to explain the pressures of belonging to a professional middle class family, a concern which is echoed in several of the other narratives. He sadly loses his lover, who feels compelled to marry a young woman in order to keep up appearances and gain promotion at work.

Pangi nonetheless makes an interesting comment about his relationship with his father:

I was lucky enough to have an understanding father. He knew about my relationship with Sipho. One day I had gone to a cousin's place who was teaching me chess. I had to come home very late. My father told me that Sipho had come looking for me and that he had looked very disappointed to find me not in. At that point my father told me that he knew I was fond of Sipho and he knew we probably slept together. He wasn't angry with me. Instead, he said that it was normal in our society for men to sleep together, but only up to a certain age. It would be possible for some young men until they had served in the king's army. Then they would be given wives by their elders. Ndebele society is a fairly conservative society such that roles are defined for every age group and every gender. So, when my father told me these things I kind of believed I would stop sleeping with men one day and it was probably part of growing up. I was 22 at this point. I looked at my father and thought I would be like him some day. He never made me feel bad about being gay. At the same time he never encouraged me. I think he left it open to me and allowed me to be an individual (3).

Pangi's narrative dispenses with misconceptions about homosexuality in Zimbabwe. Significantly, he gives evidence of a history and a space for homosexuality in traditional Ndebele society.

The description of a father-son relationship is on the one hand a fascinating example of tolerance and understanding. On the other hand, it is cognisant of the history of customary practices in Ndebele society. In the modern sense, it appears to espouse a liberal or libertarian notion of individual rights. Yet it does not completely detach itself from an understanding of identity based on a sense of history and community.

There is a noticeable disjunction between the father's and son's concepts of same sex relationships, however: these, it seems, are homosexuality as a transitional stage versus homosexuality as a permanent lifestyle. Since Pangi thought he would become like his father, this suggests that at one point he would have liked to model his (sexual) identity on that of his father (and that he did not find his desire for sex with another man incompatible with this). However, it is interesting that Pangi uses the word "thought" (i.e. in the past) - which suggests he thinks differently on the subject now. At the time of writing this narrative, he seems to recognise gayness as an integral component of his personal identity. Another noticeable feature of the testimony is that Pangi mentions his father, rather than his mother, in his 'coming out' narrative - an apparent difference with western thought, which often automatically associates male homosexuality with a close mother-son bond.

In his 2002 annotation, Goddard states that Pangi went on to become a counsellor and well-respected chairperson for GALZ. However, still suffering from the pressures of a homophobic society, he tragically took his own life - just a few hours after the annual Jacaranda Queen drag pageant in Harare in 1999 (*Sahwira* 2002: 1).

"Not Ashamed"

David, who grew up in a rural area, is proud to be gay: "I am not shy of my sexual life and have come out of the closet" (51). This may seem an unfettered embrace of a modern gay selfhood. Yet he also speaks of a possible 'gay space' in traditional African society:

My dream for the future is to live with my lover in my own small home consisting of a hut, some cattle and a community of people around me to help with the farming. I would like to play the role of *gogo* (grandmother). Although I hold onto this dream, now is not the right time for it to come true. However, it is not impossible because I have met a homosexual family similar to this in Matabeleland, in the Tsholotsho rural area.

I met them through an old school friend. This friend is gay and has become a *nganga* [traditional healer with spiritual powers]. He dresses in traditional women's clothing of animal skins and his home is decorated in the fashion of a traditional African home. He is completely accepted by the community because he heals many people. Homosexuality is often seen as evidence that a man is possessed by a female spirit. If the spirit is helpful, and encourages the person to become involved in community affairs, then the person sometimes becomes a spirit medium, particularly if someone else in the family was a medium (as was the case of my friend). If the spirit appears to cause the man to rape or behave in any way which is judged harmful to the community, then it is considered evil and he may be ostracised (51).

This lends credence to the view that it was not homosexuality that was imported from the West but homophobia. David says that when he told his grandmother he was gay, "she replied that it was probably a good thing because there were already too many children in the family to feed" (51). The main concern about a gay identity and lifestyle in traditional society is the issue of reproduction. It is not so much the act of sex between two men or two women that is anathema to traditional custom, but the rather radical assertion of a lifestyle that does not lead to marriage and reproduction within traditional family structures. Here David's grandmother turns traditional misgivings about gayness on their head through declaring the merits of leading a non-reproductive lifestyle.

David's descriptions of space within the traditional family and community for homosexuality - space which apparently existed long before the arrival of colonialism and the European settlers - are fascinating. So, too, is his imagining of alternative models for family and community life, and the fact that David envisages his future - a gay identity - not in a westernised urban space, but rather transposed onto a more traditional rural landscape. Unlike Pangi, whose model of same-sex sexuality is quite

classically masculine (derived from his father, about soldiers, etc.), David expresses the concept of a feminine spirit or sensibility at the core of his gayness.

“Beginning to Rise in the Political Game”

Joseph, another contributor, who discusses social and work responsibilities, seems to feel the weight of homophobia more heavily, and is less upbeat. He talks about rising in the political game and declares that his vocation is within the governing political party. Like others, he states that, “I am convinced that many gay people in this society go on to marry not because they feel like it but because they have got to sustain a social image” (11). He explains, “I myself have faced such pressures. I’ve got this political responsibility, I’ve got this administrative responsibility, I’ve got this public duty and the pressure is: just get settled so that we know that you are socially responsible” (11).

Joseph seems to hold an essentialist view of a gay identity; and he criticises those who do not fit his definition: “There is a group of black people who might not necessarily be gay but realise they can get something out of it. I believe that that kind of relationship cripples the personality; it destroys one’s true identity” (11). He refers perhaps to ‘gay prostitutes’, whose motives are materialistic and whose sexual orientation, in his view, is not genuinely or exclusively gay. However, it begins to emerge from the *Sahwira* narratives as a whole that a neat scheme of sexual orientation in the Zimbabwean context is ultimately untenable: exceptions and inconsistencies abound.

“Shungu”

“Shungu”, a narrative written in Shona by Poliyana Mangwiro, records the experience of growing up in a rural area where she preferred herding and hunting with the boys than doing housework with other girls. It translates roughly as follows. Despite being attracted to women as a teenager, she was pressured into marrying a man. However, her marriage fell apart because she was not interested in sex with him. After getting a divorce, she met Gertrude and the two became lovers, living in Epworth. However, Gertrude died, leaving Poliyana feeling empty, yet hopeful of meeting another female companion (8). Poliyana expresses traditionally masculine identifications in terms of her ‘tom-boy’ interests as a young girl, yet it seems a traditional woman’s role was imposed on her by a society unprepared to accommodate her deviation. Goddard notes

that Poliyana suffered harassment in the Marondera community when they discovered her connections to GALZ and her role in helping the organisation during the 1996 Book Fair. She became the subject of an Amnesty International human rights alert, when she was threatened with rape and murder, but she survived the ordeal and became increasingly active in other LGBT project-work. Sadly, however, she died from AIDS in May 2000 (7).

“My Wife’s Name is Ruth”

Another lesbian, Martha, challenges prescribed gender roles by announcing that, “My wife’s name is Ruth” (13). Martha, who is twenty-three at the time of writing this narrative, says that Ruth, twenty-four, has promised “that as long as she is alive she will not get married to a man but only to me, a woman” (13). The theme of commitment predominates in this narrative: “She vowed never to make a mistake like that and that’s exactly how I feel. We are even thinking of paying *lobola* (bride price) for my one and only Ruth” (13). Martha explains their self-sufficient livelihood (this narrative, like the others, was recorded in early 1990s, when Zimbabwe was economically more prosperous): “I do cross-border shopping and sell the goods back home. Besides going out of the country, I do hairdressing at the back of my home, and my wife does crocheting and knitting” (13). Both are religious it seems: “During my spare time with Ruth, we go to church and pray to god” (13), says Martha. The title of her story, as Goddard notes, seems to be modelled on the Biblical Book of Ruth, apt because it is also about women and commitment - staying together.

Martha ends with a short verse:

A woman and her woman
Husband and her wife
She marries
And she married another she (13).

The mismatching personal pronouns in this poem “her wife” and “she marries another she” obviously jar with the heteronormative binary oppositions structured into language (man/woman; husband/wife) and the verse seems deliberately confrontational. Strikingly, however, this couple wish to assimilate their lesbian relationship within

existing traditional marriage structures - and not necessarily overturn the custom of *lobola*.

In asserting their economic independence, they appear to have broken with the social constraints of the patriarchal family. But the intended payment of *lobola* suggests compromise. Further evidence of a drive towards assimilation is Martha and Ruths' church-going: again, they appear to be in the process of re-locating themselves in the structures of traditional society rather than completely detaching themselves. The same applies to their notion of marriage. Martha's concluding piece of poetry celebrates their same sex union – placing it on a par with traditional heterosexual marriage.

“The right to be ourselves”

This anonymous contributor, who grew up in Mutare, testifies as to how he arrived at the concept of a gay selfhood; and the narrative is for this reason informative:

At thirteen, I remember guys telling me I looked like a girl. I didn't know what they meant or implied. I shared everything with my best friend. He was the one who told me I should look up the word homosexual in the dictionary. By then, I was having crazy feelings of wanting to kiss men. I enjoyed the attention of guys – this made me so emotionally charged and passionate. The word 'homosexual' explained the way I felt. It was the first time I identified myself as being gay. I thought I was the only person in the world who felt like that (35).

This narrative illustrates a process in which same-sex desires and sensibilities become an integral part of personal identity - in large part through external definition. Yet the writer's experience of same-sex sexuality, in its many possible manifestations, seems to extend beyond dictionary descriptions: “I had a very close friend with whom I had my first sexual relationship,” he explains: “He wasn't gay but he understood me. He introduced me to other black gay men” (36). In the writer's view, it seems, sexual acts and sexual identities are quite distinct: his first sexual partner could have 'gay' sex without necessarily identifying as gay. This evidences fluidity in Zimbabwean patterns of sexual behaviour confounding the straight-gay binary divisions that seem more fixed, conceptually, in the West. More simply, the writer does not see an antagonistic division between straight and gay, but a potential alliance:

There are many straight people who confide in us, who like us for what we are, who value our support. They make us feel worthwhile, and we also feel proud to be respected in such a way, not only as gay people but as individuals who have a sexual difference, as part and parcel of the society (37).

Such statements evidence the beginning, for the contributor, of a gay pride – the emergence of a sense of personal identity in tandem with a movement that stresses the importance of respect and understanding of individuality.

“Identical Dresses”

Transgendered Leonard Russel, “one of the most flamboyant coloured queens” (14), recounts his arrest for cross-dressing after an evening out on the town with other ‘girls’. The episode, occurring shortly after independence, is transcribed from a lively interview with Leonard. (The letters B- and P- replace the names of individuals, whose anonymity is protected):

[W]e went to this nightclub, Jobs, dragged, in drag. Total drag. Forties look. Big velvet bows, everything, stockings, stilettos. We parted. This black guy came to sit near me, was interested, flashing all these dollar notes, really trying to impress me, took me for a dance once or twice. B- and I went to the toilet to have a good chat, a giggle about the whole situation. We got back and sat for a while and then B- disappeared so I dashed off to the toilet to see where he was. P- was sitting with this coloured guy who he had known, already had a scene with this guy so he was fine. I went to see where B- was and the next thing was he was getting beaten up in the office. I ran to P- to tell him what was happening.

Then this guy meets me and he says, ‘What do you think you are doing[?]’ I replied, ‘What do you mean?’ he says, ‘Don’t you think I don’t know that you are a man.’ I said, ‘I’m not a man.’ He said, ‘I’ll strip you naked in front of everybody in this club so they can all see.’

With that I looked at the door, the entrance and there were police. I just ran (laughs). Ran to the police. And stood there. Just stood at the door. They were all looking at me. They don't know I am a man. The guy comes and says, 'He's a homosexual, *ngotshani*.' All sorts of names. So the police said, 'Are you?' 'What's going on?' I said, 'I don't know what he is talking about. I am not a man.' (laughs) All these people are coming out of Jobs. They are running around me, lifting my dress and I am hitting them with my rings (laughs). And I'm just hitting all these hands saying leave me (laughs). All you could hear is 'kot kot kot kot kot'. Stilettos everywhere. It was crazy. I looked again and there were thousands of people standing around me. P- and B- eventually came to join me. The police had been to fetch them and we were escorted to the police station by the whole of Job's night spot. It had practically closed down. We were locked up in central Police Station for the night in drag. I won't forget it. We were released at 11 am the next day. Charged ten dollars for impersonating a woman. And we didn't even argue. We just paid and left! (laughs) We really got a good lecture from this one CID man who said, 'Its all very well to do this in London or places but Zimbabwe is not ready for this. You must just go, you mustn't do it again, you must take it easy. When you do have parties just keep them indoors. Don't go out and cause a bit of a stir or problems in the street.' (19-20)

This narrative serves as a snapshot of newly independent Zimbabwean society, where authoritative structures are anxious to demarcate the parameters of gender (and possibly race too) both in popular culture and in official policy. Leonard, who is mixed race, is chatted up by a black man, who may or may not know his real gender identity. This demonstrates the transgressive potential of drag. However, B-'s beating also evidences the possible violent consequences. The transgression is also punished by the state, in that the drag queens are locked up in a cell and given a fine, specifically for the 'offence' of impersonating women. The CID man, at pains to contain the transgression, asks the 'girls' to keep their parties indoors and at home, exemplifying an anxiety about allowing drag to happen in public. Nonetheless, in Leonard's story, the public shows a mixture of reactions: obvious curiosity and enjoyment of the drag episode in some cases, violent revulsion and opposition in others. This reveals something of an ambivalence of attitudes within Zimbabwean society.

Cross-dressing represents a threat because it blurs the borders of gender, which are important to the maintenance of heteronormative, patriarchal ideology. As McClintock states “Clothes are the visible signs of social identity but they are also permanently subject to disarrangement and symbolic theft. For this reason the cross-dresser can be invested with potent and subversive powers” (1995: 67). This narrative, like other gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered narratives in the collection - subverts the seriousness of straight society and effectively, playfully rattles the framework of a sexually repressive status quo.

Leonard sadly died in Bulawayo in 1999. In a fitting tribute, however, Goddard notes:

The GALZ queens, who attended his funeral, afterwards paraded down the streets of the city until they reached the cemetery. Nobody questioned this extravagant behaviour because we all knew Leonard would have loved it. After the lowering of the coffin, the queens tucked in their dresses, grabbed the shovels and filled in his grave (2002: 14).

Although, as Leonard Russel’s narrative suggests, transvestism represents a major transgression of gender and sexuality, cross-dressers have nevertheless carved a space for themselves in Zimbabwean society. The annual Jacaranda Queen pageant, held in Harare has, according to the *GayZim* website, “become the premier event on the gay social calendar in Zimbabwe...[D]espite all the differences within the community, most people would agree that the Jacaranda Queen is the place to be in October every year” (*GayZim* 2003c). This might be considered the Zimbabwean version of an LGBT carnival. Photographs and profiles of previous winners are posted on the *GayZim* website. The Jacaranda Queen is esteemed in the community and ‘her’ role is to lend support to worthy charitable causes. Naomi, reigning Jacaranda Queen in 1999, writes a column called “The Queen’s Page” in the *Galzette* where she urges the community to practice safer sex (*Galzette* June 1999: 15).¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Of course, it is not always clear whether this pageant and other such carnivals are necessarily disruptive of the prevailing status quo. Indeed sometimes these are condoned as a means of keeping anti-social forces in check.

General Observations

Contradicting dominant historical and anthropological accounts as well as the pronouncements of Mugabe, Pangi's and David's narratives suggest a space in both traditional and modern African societies where same-sex relationships have existed and even been tolerated by knowing communities. Although this point will seem obvious to many, it nevertheless needs to be brought to the attention of many in Zimbabwe Studies, who continue to deny the fact or to remain conspicuously silent about it. The above testimonies expose blindspots in dominant heterosexist, historiographic and anthropological practice; and they function powerfully as a counter-narrative.

On the whole, the collection demonstrates that LGBTs are looking to co-exist with the status quo, rather than radically disrupt it. This point emerges from Pangi's, Martha's and David's narratives, where lesbian and gay lifestyles in Zimbabwe are not necessarily envisaged as antithetical to traditional African society but – in several cases - supplementary to it. This poses a challenge to the LGBT emancipation movement, as represented by GALZ, whose vision seems a more radical transformation of Zimbabwean society.

The *Sahwira* narratives are an important site of identification for other Zimbabwean LGBTs. However, they also reveal tensions and fluctuations in notions of sexual identity, as well as a certain amount of inconsistency. Rigid distinctions between straight and gay give way to the blurring of the boundaries in several accounts. Although at times Zimbabwean gay lifestyles seem to coincide, in character, with Western gay lifestyles, at other times they diverge significantly. Many of the contributors seem aware that gay is a modern concept describing an old practice, yet they have consciously chosen this term to describe their present identities. This “brings to the fore tensions between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’” as the preface states (v).

In traditional societies failure to marry could be viewed as a violation of kinship. Phillips notes that in Zimbabwean society “marriage and the production of children is the primary medium through which the independent status and power which constitute adulthood are achieved, and at the heart of marriage is the objective of raising children” (1997: 480). However, same sex relations, evidence suggests, were not perceived as directly threatening, provided they were discreet and did not jeopardise marriage

arrangements. Embracing homosexuality as an identity, on the other hand, does represent a threat to the old structures of traditional societies and it is for this reason that LGBT lifestyles (which do not embrace heterosexual marriage conventions) are seen as destabilising the status quo.

This is not altogether different from the history of same-sex relationships in the West, however; and here it is illuminating to consider sexuality in a materialist frame of analysis. As Peter Ray observes, “the possibility of a modern homosexual lifestyle did not exist for any significant section of the population before the emergence of industrial capitalism” (1996: 252). The same appears to be true, to some extent, for Zimbabwe – although traditional spaces for homosexuality warrant more serious attention than they have so far received. Commenting on current LGBT politics, Ray gives credence to the arguments for caution in the liberation movement: “to argue that straight and gay are ‘innately different’ in a society where prejudice remains powerful can only reinforce the idea that one is innately superior and the other inferior” (252). However, GALZ seems aware of this problematic because it argues for equality and an end to “discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation” which may bring “gay rights to mind [but] there is nothing in the phrase itself that requires that this be so” (GALZ 1999: 3). As they explain, “We all have a sexual orientation, whether it be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, transsexual, intrasexual etc.” (3).

Nevertheless, the LGBT movement in Zimbabwe has witnessed fervent debate between conservatives and radicals. As Goddard comments, “There were many arguments and conversations, especially in 1996 about whether we should follow a more cautious, gradual path towards LGBT emancipation or a more immediate confrontational one” (9). Members were balloted before the organisation decided to exhibit at the Book Fairs and the ‘confrontationists’ won, but only narrowly. The LGBT community in Zimbabwe is by no means a monolithic entity and the emancipation strategy is not always agreed, as is witnessed by the Ngoni Chaidzo split, and the many other LGBT disaffiliations with GALZ following its increasingly politicised agenda. The personal testimonies in *Sahwira*, collected before the Book Fair imbroglio, are significant because although they show the development and politicisation of a collective LGBT consciousness at a personal level, they also register diverse experiences and concepts of homosexuality.

Sahwira is the most substantial collection of LGBT narratives to date but Berthiaume's interview with a twenty-two year old lesbian, Tendai, and a twenty-four year old gay student, Douglas, confirms that issues addressed before 1995 remain current in 2003. "According to Douglas and others, the real threat isn't the law or the government but the traditional culture many Zimbabweans – especially those in the townships and rural areas – still adhere to" (*Behind the Mask* 2003k). Pressure to get married remains an imperative of traditional culture for LGBTs (a notable theme in the queer-themed literature to be considered shortly). "Douglas's partner was forced by his family to get married," states Berthiaume, and "his partner's wife thinks the two men are just good friends" (2003k). Douglas says, "A time will come when I am forced into a marriage" (2003k). Tendai, meanwhile, "had to introduce her aunt to a male friend who posed as her boyfriend" and she says: "It was awful. I didn't like it at all. They say dogs and pigs are better than gay people...That makes me angry. We are all human beings"(2003k).

4. Queer Representations and Gender Re-evaluations in Zimbabwean Fiction

The mid-1990s were a watershed moment for the issue of homosexuality in Zimbabwean writing. Several authors are now interrogating masculine and feminine sexual identity in the wake of the publicised homosexual disclosures, and some have begun to address queer issues overtly. This is a new development in Zimbabwean literature and my analysis of this trend is unprecedented, as well as controversial. But the case of queerness in Zimbabwean literature is too important to ignore. In Zimbabwean literature (and culture) there are signs of fracture in the ideology of classic masculinity, as well as classic femininity. Often accompanying this, and linked, is the contemplation of queer sexuality.

As yet no women writers have written overtly on the subject of same-sex sexuality, though three male writers, Marechera, Madanhire and Mungoshi, explore dramatic re-evaluations of womanhood in the wake of homosexual revelations. This does not, however, preclude women's writing from queer analyses, as Boehmer has demonstrated in a new reading of Vera and Dangarembga. She asks "whether a queer sexuality may be covertly encoded in these writers' texts in the form of special friendship between women" (2003: 137). In particular she considers the pairing of Tambudzai and Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions* and the relationship of Phephelaphi and Deliwe in Vera's *Butterfly Burning*. Of the latter, Boehmer observes "the novel offers a vivid dramatization of a woman's frustrated yearning for self-realization – for a selving, that is, as other to a man, and other to the submission to desire with a man" (141). This links, I will suggest, with Marechera's depiction of a lesbian affair in *Mindblast*, represented more explicitly.

Marechera, who writes most extensively, transgressively and challengingly on queer sexuality, began addressing the taboo topic at least fifteen years before the emergence of homosexuality as a major cultural and political issue in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, his queer representations remain either unpublished or completely neglected. It is my aim to draw these to critical attention. Marechera's unique attitude towards sexuality, which precedes the discursive constructions of sexual identity that have inevitably shaped literary output since 1995, is important, I will argue, because he posits a challenging view of sexual orientation. Since there are so few queer representations in the body of Zimbabwean literature, I will consider all those I have been able to locate.

Nyamfukudza addresses the taboo topic of homosexuality earlier than most of his contemporaries, linking it with a crisis in masculine identity, in *Posters on the Wall*, a short story contained in the *If God was a Woman* collection of 1991. The story centres on Taku, whose girlfriend Noma bemoans his inadequacy to impress her with his masculinity. Taku therefore devises an elaborate plan to steal his rich boss's jaguar, by which means he hopes to win the respect of his girlfriend - but the plan backfires. Noma, who drives the car across the border to Zambia to do the exchange with Taku's macho gangster friend, Ambrose, is far more impressed by his masculine power and prowess: "Unlike her husband, the man projected a certain thrust, a sense of purpose" (Nyamfukudza 1991: 83). Unfortunately Taku goes to prison for theft, where he feels emasculated and has a long time to consider the pressures that have led to his incarceration.

He broods over the fate of men such as himself, whose constant belittling by manipulative women has, in his view, helped set them on a path towards self-destruction. This is the point that the Zimbabwean critic Zhuwarara makes, at least, in his analysis of the text:

Ironically, while shedding off his sentimental attachment to Noma, he finds it odd and misplaced that his fellow convicts in prison continue to idolise their girlfriends outside notwithstanding their degraded sexual lives in prison. This absurd situation fuels his hatred of Noma which, upon his release, explodes into violence as he bashes her into a bloody mess for reasons related to his sexual jealousy (2001: 167).

By "degraded sexual lives" Zhuwarara problematically refers to the homosexual prison subculture. Unfortunately, he does not clarify an important distinction: same-sex relations are not necessarily degraded in and of themselves; however, the involuntary nature of many of these could be described as degrading. More persuasively, however, Zhuwarara argues misogynistic violence is the outcome of masculine frustration and jealousy. Nyamfukudza traces Taku's masculine meltdown as follows:

[Taku] had a cold horror of the way the guys around him sentimentalised the womanlessness of their isolation. Yet it was far from sexless. They cherished photographs of their erstwhile female companions like icons, fetishes. They spoke continuously about girls. They also had clandestine affairs with younger, somewhat shell-shocked defenceless youths, whom they cowed into submission with naked, boastful brutality. From the moment he arrived, they called a marked youth a girl. The new recruits were normally processed on a Sunday morning when the convicts milled about and did their washing. They would compete in a playful, public cajoling, taunting him. If the new boy hesitated, if he got confused by this anarchic, debauched courtship in this highly regimented epitome of order, then they made him their woman, and many succumbed easily, almost as if it were a role they had been prepared for all their lives. Somehow, the sexual separation and the institutionalization distinguished some among the men as girls.

He didn't give a damn about it. He didn't even dislike the fact that they fucked each other's bums. He just wished they were more open about it. So he talked about it, asked them why didn't they hold hands or kiss. Were they really in love? He angered them because they much preferred to talk about the females in their photographs (Nyamfukudza 1991: 85).

Machismo is reformulated, because of "the womanlessness of their isolation", as sexual domination of men over other men: the new boys are turned into 'girls', feminised and subordinated. But Taku, despite his declared open-mindedness, refuses to recognise this as anything other than hypocritical and absurd. He does not object to the homosexuality per se, but to the double standards and denials that surround it. Reading between the lines, however, one could argue he is also jealous of their sexual outlet, frustrated by his own abstinence in view of the sex he witnesses around him. But he also reads their acts differently, suggesting there is more to these attachments and that the idealisation of their absent women, of their longing for these women, is a fraud.

Nyamfukudza's narrator is crude in his account of the same-sex relationships, though seemingly indifferent, objective and completely detached, as if simply describing the inevitable triumph of libidinal drives over socially-sanctioned behaviour, in extraordinary circumstances. Problematically, because 'depraved' prison sex is his only representation of homosexuality to date, Nyamfukudza implies this is the only place one

might expect same-sex relationships to occur. Taku points to his fellow inmates' shame regarding masculine intimacy. It seems, therefore, that homosexuality is accounted for as desperation - pent-up frustration and the absence of a 'normal' outlet for it (i.e. sex with 'real' women). At the same time there is a tension in the text though because Taku refuses to see the idealisation of absent women as normal. On the surface, *Posters on the Wall*, despite its candid account, does not significantly challenge the ideology of heteronormativity. But it does, in the early 1990s, begin to expose fractures in the construction of classic masculinity, and this has become an important feature of Nyamfukudza's writing – which makes him a highly significant writer in the theme of transgression.¹⁰⁷

Apart from Marechera's representations, Nyamfukudza's is the only overt account of homosexuality in Zimbabwean literature before 1995. Since 1995, Zimbabwean literature has witnessed two major texts that tackle the issue of homosexuality in more depth. These are Nevanji Madanhire's novel *If the Wind Blew* (1996) and Charles Mungoshi's short story, *Of Lovers and Wives* (1997). Both focus on female characters waking up to shocking discoveries of homosexuality, and both mirror a society reeling from the revelations of the mid-1990s.

Nevanji Madanhiri

In *If the Wind Blew*, Isis, an investigative journalist, suffers the effects of brutal male domination in her place of work and on the political scene, as she uncovers a plot to assassinate the leader of the opposition (in a fictitious country resembling Zimbabwe remarkably). When she is nearly eight months pregnant, she discovers that her husband Hebrew is more than just a friend to their Swedish houseguest Christiaan. Towards the end of the novel, late at night, Isis is "dazed" to discover that Hebrew and Christiaan are not playing chess, as she imagines, but sleeping together in the spare room - with the door wide open as if to emphasise the disclosure:

It had been an intense love act... Later in the night, she walked like a ghost to take another look. The moon filtered more intensely into the room. Hebrew lay

¹⁰⁷ Prison sex is also a theme in Shakespeare Nyereyemhuka's *Chappy's Tribulations*. Chappy, a gigolo to his boss's wife, is falsely accused, by them both, of rape. "After having spent a night in the cells with the sex starved veterans on remand, his backside searing from the activities of the previous night, they came to withdraw the charges" (2000: 91). This is a brief but significant mention of the taboo topic.

peacefully on Christiaan's breast. Christiaan himself breathed deeply in and lengthily out (Madanhire 1996: 97-98).

Isis cannot believe her eyes, goes into premature labour, and sadly loses the child. But she is not so much shocked by her husband's homosexuality as she is by her own blindness towards it. Later in the hospital, Hebrew breaks down and the truth comes, belatedly, from his own mouth: "I tried to suppress it, but its [*sic*] my preference. I am convinced now that it's what I always wanted. All those girls were just cover-ups" (98). Hebrew, once renowned as an incorrigible womaniser, admits he is actually gay. This articulation of gay sexual preference on the pages of mainstream Zimbabwean literature is a milestone. Moreover, it confounds stereotypes in the homophobic imagination because Hebrew is not only black and gay but also classically masculine: good-looking, fit, strong, and virile – an 'ordinary' man. Also, although his lover is European, he seems quite clear in his mind that his gayness is quite independent of 'European influences'.

The gay affair is a brief but astounding revelation with seismic consequences: Isis is prompted, after the divorce, to set about re-defining her concept of womanhood and making fundamental changes to her life. Named after the ancient Egyptian Goddess, Isis discovers parallels between her life and that of her namesake. She hears a feminist revision of the Isis myth on the radio, by chance, discovering her namesake was "the goddess of justice" and "the most powerful deity... [but]... [s]he had to be destroyed because men could not stand to be ruled by women", so "they married her off to Osiris, thereby transferring all her powers to a man" - and she was thereafter "reduced to a devoted wife" (101). The parallels with Isis Ndlovu's experiences of male domination become clearer and clearer. The radio programme awakens a dormant part of her consciousness to the possibility that, like her namesake, she may be immensely gifted herself, and need not live in the shadow of her husband, or depend, for her success and sense of identity, on men. The sub-plot of Hebrew's gay love affair seems to emphasise, for Isis, that playing the dutiful wife or any other circumscribed social role is ultimately untenable and absurd.

The gay episode awakens not only Isis but also the reader to an unconcealed image of desire and intimacy between men. Noticeably, against the grain of the prevailingly homophobic dominant fiction, Madanhire's non-judgmental narrator does not condemn

the gay affair as 'deviancy' but instead offsets it within a broader context of transgression. If we consider the significance of the names, Hebrew (i.e. Jewish) and Christiaan (i.e. Christian), who are black and white respectively, the affair is not only homosexual but inter-racial, and inter-religious at a symbolic level. Moreover, if Hebrew and Christiaan, like Isis, are read as representing deities, their sexual congress is radically transgressive in a cosmological dimension.

Relevant to an analysis of this novel is the fact that the crime of sodomy in Zimbabwe was originally defined as "sexual congress *per anum* between a man and woman, or between a man and a man, self-masturbation, mutual masturbation, oral intercourse and lesbian acts and even heterosexual sex of any sort between a Jew and a Christian" (Propotkin 1998: 3). In short, it used to encompass a broad range of sexual transgressions, which are no longer considered criminal acts. Hence Madanhire's text can be read as making the point that inter-racial and inter-religious sexual relationships, once stigmatised and even illegal in the past, are now quite acceptable, at least in many societies. It is not clear whether Hebrew and Christiaan will eventually find such acceptance because they subsequently disappear from the narrative. Madanhire nevertheless allows the unpredictable gay episode to permanently destabilise heteronormative assumptions and to reverberate with long-term implications both inside and outside the text. This is in contrast to Mungoshi, who neatly contains the issue of homosexuality in a more conventionally-styled short story, as we will see.

Charles Mungoshi

Mungoshi, a veteran of Zimbabwean literature, was completely silent on the subject of homosexuality before the mid-1990s. Significantly it appears that the increased public awareness of homosexuality in the mid-1990s created the space for Mungoshi, like Madanhire, to address the issue directly. *Of Lovers and Wives*, a gay-themed short story in the *Walking Still* collection (1997), has attracted considerable attention and shifted perceptions of the author and his writing on the subject of sexuality. Other queer readings of Mungoshi's work may be possible.

In *The Empty House*, a suggestive text immediately preceding *Of Lovers and Wives* (and discussed in Chapter One), Gwizo can be seen as a queer character. He is the black sheep of the family, and his 'Otherness' is a focus of attention in the narrative. "Painting

for him was a sacred calling”, we are told: however, “Art, among Maneto’s people, was a foreign thing, a disease, something you didn’t want to be associated with” (Mungoshi 1997: 83). Although there is no direct evidence to suggest he is homosexual, Gwizo nevertheless suffers ‘queer stigma’. His apparent disinterest in sex with his wife furthermore suggests he is not predisposed to heterosexuality. His taking a white American wife, Agatha – also taboo in this society – can be read as the unconscious construction of a smokescreen to conceal the even greater taboo of Gwizo’s latent homosexuality. This reading becomes more tenable when one considers the forthright treatment of a same-sex relationship in *Of Lovers and Wives*, the story that follows. The juxtapositioning of these two texts in the *Walking Still* collection is not a coincidence, I suggest. As if in sequence, a covert representation of queerness is followed by an overt disclosure.

Of Lovers and Wives attempts at realistic representation of an intimate sexual relationship between two black men and is ostensibly a serious and sensitive treatment of a taboo topic. Problematically, however, it slips at crucial moments – the beginning and the ending – into a homophobic frame of representation. The story is focalised through Shami, a wife who suddenly, shockingly, discovers the secret of homosexuality. Shami is married to Chasi for eighteen years before it finally dawns on her that his live-in friend, Peter, is actually his lover and in fact as much his ‘wife’ as she is.

The narrative opens as follows: “In the middle of the night, in the midst of a very pleasant dream involving some children and some men, Shami shook him violently and asked him if he was dreaming about Peter” (Mungoshi 1997: 105). The first sentence of the story implies that homosexuals, generally and typically, dream and fantasise about pederasty. With an interchangeable link between the two ‘perversions’ so firmly in place in the homophobic imagination, and so instantly understood by the readership our narrator assumes, the author simply sandwiches the innuendo in a sentence clause, with no further elaboration. This slip seems out of synch with a gay relationship that is described as gentle, loving, and quite honest for the most part.

We are told that Shami “realized with shocking clarity that the two men hadn’t hidden anything from her, but that she had been blind to what was going on right under her very nose” (106). Like Isis in *If the Wind Blew*, Shami feels foolish for not having recognised her husband’s bisexuality beforehand. Unlike Isis, though, she would rather

erase the truth than face its life-changing challenges. Out of the blue, she receives a dramatic phone call, which seems like a solution, an answer to prayer. She is not sorry to tell Chasi that Peter has died in a car accident even though, as she speculates, it may have been suicide because he drove off a bridge. Our omniscient narrator is not sorry either, it seems:

There could be no question about the rightness of certain situations, under certain circumstances. And when Chasi decided to leave town after Peter's funeral, preferring only to visit his wife occasionally during a weekend, Shamiso felt that that too had its own fitting rightness (11).

To many readers, this devastating 'resolution' might not have "a fitting rightness" to it at all. Its condemnatory tone, without irony in the narrative voice, is deeply disturbing. Sceptical readers may dispute the necessity for Peter's death and find its treatment quite distressing. Shami buries the truth, quite literally, to achieve a false sense of closure in her ruffled life. Similarly, the narrative as a whole could be criticised for burying the unsettling issues it raises rather than properly pursuing their full implications. In this regard it invites comparison with *If the Wind Blew*, a less resolute, more open-ended exploration of the theme of homosexuality.

Mungoshi's somewhat forced ending reads more like anxious authorial intervention than divine intervention, the recuperation of an unsettling text back into the dominant fiction of heteronormativity. I do not dispute the possible occurrence of such situations and tragedies in real life. I do, however, question Mungoshi's use of the device of closure here to seal off a heteronormative moral order - the attempt to declare it ultimately unassailable. Also, the ending seems derivative of Rhodesia Literature Bureau formulae for the punishment of wayward women (discussed in Chapter Two). Peter, depicted as the feminine partner, suffers the gruesome fate of the adulteress or 'illegitimate wife'. This conclusion is also disconcertingly reminiscent of the pre-1970s Hollywood cliché where "characters with a questionable sexuality would meet with a nasty end in the last reel," as Vito Russo notes in *The Celluloid Closet* (Epstein and Friedman 1995). Nevertheless, the author's treatment of homosexuality exemplifies serious mainstream literature finally responding to an increasingly visible reality. Problematically, for queer readers at least, it leaves the edifice of heteronormativity and

some disturbing homophobic assumptions intact. One could even argue it reinforces them.

The shifting trope of homosexuality in Marechera

Marechera's treatment of homosexuality, by contrast with Mungoshi's conventional style, represents an avant-garde literature not merely catching up with public awareness, but several steps ahead of it, refusing closure, and permanently rupturing heteronormative certainties. Marechera interrogates classic masculine sexuality as well as traditional notions of feminine sexuality, and he destabilises the dominant fiction of compulsory heterosexuality. Ambiguous and inconsistent, his treatment of homosexuality can be considered both pro-gay and homophobic - or neither. Marechera deftly eludes categorisation; and this makes him a challenging figure in literary, cultural and LGBT studies.

Identity (including sexual identity) is a fiction for Marechera and one that is continuously changing.¹⁰⁸ The dominant fiction (including broadcast and print media narratives) has sought to consolidate and stabilise a heteronormative sexual identity in accordance with established ideologies. But, according to Marechera in *The Black Insider*:

Existence itself becomes a description, our lives a mere pattern in the massive universal web of words...The only certain thing about these world descriptions is the damage they do, the devastation they bring to the minds of men and children (1990: 36).

Against the ideological manipulation of one form of fiction, Marechera refuses to recognise what he terms "the emperor's new clothes" – a fake dressing up of the truth, to construct a problematic version of reality. For Marechera, a false consciousness results from unthinking identification with these strictures:

The idea of personality moulded by the cultural artifacts outside us and the sense of identity with a specific time and place, as though the human being is as rooted in his own kind of soil as any weed, is what creates for us the emperor's new

¹⁰⁸ See Taitz and Levin (1999: 163-175).

clothes. And it is quite easy inflexibly to deceive ourselves that we are fully clothed and not naked (1990: 81).

The object is to liberate the individual and Marechera's writing, accordingly, is a project in stripping down to the naked truth. For him, all ideologies are unwanted accessories; and he recognises heteronormativity as one such ideology, as the following examples attest.

Black Skin, What Mask (1978), considered in Chapter One, alerts us to the questions and comments of Frantz Fanon regarding race and sexuality. In an exploration of black masculine identity, Marechera pries off a variety of masks, one of which is the idea of compulsory heterosexuality for black African men. An apparently sincere narrator counsels his troubled Oxford University friend, also from the then-Rhodesia, who hates himself for being black and is having no luck with girls. In casual conversation, the narrator asks, "Why don't you try men?" The friend is mortified but the narrator calmly says, "I have long suspected it" (1978: 98), and then suggests masturbation as another possible remedy for sexual frustration. This sort of refusal to steer clear of cultural taboos is a feature of Marechera's writing - exposing exactly that which is 'not talked about'. It is more than a classic masculinist put-down. The narrator has a point: his friend's homophobia, like his internalised racism, indicates a deep-seated psychosexual problem that needs to be addressed through dialogue and honest self-reflection.

In *The Black Insider*, the significance of homosexuality to literary and cultural studies is discussed seriously and intelligently in protest against the stifling taboo that surrounds it. It is linked, in an academic discussion, with the creative impulse (of Wilde, Forster and de Sade, for example) that may come from transgressive sensibilities. This seems a sympathetic and positive view, as I state at the beginning of this chapter. But strikingly with Marechera, homosexuality is an unstable signifier, which can just as easily be found alongside vice as virtue.

This is true of the short story *Oxford, Black Oxford* (also written in the late 1970s but published posthumously in the same collection), where a disillusioned narrator - again a fictionalised version of Marechera himself - exposes the secret of homosexuality in a cloistered tutorial room. His imminent expulsion from the university for indecent behaviour is juxtaposed with another scandalous misdemeanour that remains "a thin

slimy secret” (1990: 119) of the Ivory Towers. It is implied that fellow-student Stephen, described as a “white-hot bitch [who] had never produced a single essay for all the tutorials” (119), exchanges sexual favours to fulfil ‘academic requirements’. The narrator reads his essay on the Gawain Poet aloud but Stephen and his tutor do not pay attention or take him seriously. At one point he looks up to discover that “Dr Martins-Botha’s right hand was between Stephen’s thighs” (121). However, he continues reading, as though required to go along with the pretence that nothing untoward is happening. Homosexuality is associated here with hypocrisy and corruption in a powerfully elitist institution. Significantly, it is not the actual sex-act that is seen as depraved in this instance but the false pretences surrounding it. In an over-earnest reading, the derogatory reference to Stephen as a “white-hot bitch” could be considered racist, misogynist and homophobic, but the image is too creative to be dismissed as simply offensive. Also, it seems a remark in the tradition of ‘high camp’, ‘over the top’ queer parlance.

Sometimes, however, Marechera’s representations of homosexuality are more excessive, more objectionable. Corruption is associated with homosexuality and several other ‘perversions’ in *Black Sunlight* (1980). A text already discussed, regarding its apparent misogyny, in Chapter Two, the narrative opens with the iconoclastic image of a corrupt African chief displaying “his gigantic erection” (1980: 2) and demanding oral sex from Christian, the protagonist, who is his captive. This depiction of abusive homosexual sex is of course controversial, though it is imbued with heavy irony. It may be read as a masquerade, a ‘giant’ send-up. Certainly it pokes fun at high-minded notions of morality in the classic nationalist narrative, illustrating that pre-colonial ‘purity’ is nowhere to be found in this Chieftom. Here homosexuality has obviously existed prior to the arrival of the Europeans, though it has not yet been named as such. In parodic style, Christian (symbolically-named) adopts missionary-speak to ‘enlighten the ignorant’. He says, “You are not a sodomite,” but has to explain to the unknowing chief, the grotesquely comical tyrant enthroned on a pile of human skulls, that: “In the Little Oxford Dictionary a sodomite is one who has unnatural sexual intercourse with another of his own sex, especially between males. You can’t be a great chief and a buggerer in the same breath. You’re either one or the other” (2-3). It is an attempt by Christian to shame and confuse his captor and thereby escape the ordeal, but it pushes the meaning of homosexuality in the direction of deviance and pathology.

Significantly, the Chief, who is supposed to represent African tradition, is baffled to learn that what he is asking Christian to do is sodomy, that he might be “a sodomite” and that this is an ‘unnatural offence’, unbecoming of his position. Clearly he has never thought of himself as a ‘sodomite’, or even recognised the existence of such a term. When questioned on the matter, Christian discloses that these words were learnt overseas. Significantly, the reader is shown that the chief’s same-sex inclinations precede European influences, and that the description of this as perverse and pathological arrives via a ‘Christian’, armed with an Oxford Dictionary.

A progressive queer reading of this episode proves next to impossible because of its complex set of representations. The ghoulish Chief is an extremely negative queer role model. Also, the author’s apparent linkage of homosexuality with perversity and corruption is disturbing to many. On the other hand, the episode is immensely significant, at an early stage in Zimbabwean literature, for its refusal to comply with the conspiracy of silence on queer sexuality. And it would be equally problematic to deny that homosexuality, just like heterosexuality, can sometimes take sinister forms of expression. Marechera does not shy away from the grotesque and instead throws up an awkward representation for queer discourse, discomfiting, yet impossible to dismiss as invalid. More clearly problematic, however, is that Christian’s ‘normal’ masculine sexuality is measured against the Chief’s ‘deviance’. Anxious to differentiate himself from the Chief’s queer inclinations, he declares, “One man’s ornament is another man’s anathema” (2). The justified refusal to engage in homosexual sex is nevertheless tinged with homophobia. In comparison to the Chief, Christian tries to define himself as purely heterosexual.

But Christian’s homophobia, his ‘othering’ of homosexuality does not hold for long in the ensuing text, which seems to relish sexual ‘perversion’ as a weapon of assault in its anarchist operation against an oppressive establishment. The narrative is deliberately and radically unstable: “There is no center which can claim its right to an indubitable authority,” as Chennells observes (1999: 50). Classic masculinity and heteronormativity are no exception: their faultlines are exposed, at a conscious and unconscious level.

At Devil’s End, the Black Sunlight terrorist organisation’s headquarters, Christian later meets his double, Chris who, when Christian strikes a match, says: “You’re gay you know. You struck it exactly the way effeminate men are supposed to do. That proves it

beyond doubt” (Marechera 1980: 55). Although the automatic association of gayness with effeminacy is contentious, the remark is not simply homophobic. Christian is provoked into reflection about his sexual identity. This exchange is immediately followed by a discussion between the two of how good Susan is in bed (in short, a compensating reaffirmation of heterosexual identity), but the episode as a whole demonstrates great anxiety and uncertainty about sexual orientation. Devil’s End, where they have met, is a surreal place where characters can encounter mirror-images and other versions of themselves. Chris explains: “But knowing two sides does not mean one has not a side. You’ve ostensibly chosen yours but there is a vacillation in you” (56). Since they are talking primarily about sexual preferences, this could be taken to mean that those who identify as heterosexual (such as Christian) may nevertheless meet a buried homosexual side which resurfaces at times to cause uncertainty and “vacillation”. To confront a mirror-image, as Christian and Chris do, is to make unsettling discoveries, to realise that a fear of the Other is often a fear of oneself. In *Black Sunlight*, sexual identity and sexual orientation are far from fixed in a radically unstable narrative that churns up every known certainty, and attacks every known ideology. In this process, classic masculinity goes under the microscope (and the scalpel to some extent) and the homophobia and effeminaphobia of the text need to be read in this context. With Marechera, what begins as homophobia ends up as anxious recognition and admission of possible latent homosexuality – a fear of the other within the self. In this manner, his narrative moves steadily towards deconstruction of the hetero-homo binary.¹⁰⁹

Marechera also pursues the implications of homosexuality for womanhood. In “Grimknife Jr’s Story” in *Mindblast* (1984), two women have a surprise lesbian encounter, which is tender, erotic and liberating. Grace, a musician in Harare, cannot have children because she was abused as a child. She suffers in silence, feeling inadequate in a society that stigmatises infertile women. Everything changes, however, when she meets Tony’s new girlfriend, Rita:

¹⁰⁹ In *Killwatch*, a dark existential play about life, death and love, there is obvious homoerotic chemistry between the First and Second Watchmen (who are the main characters). And yet there is also homophobic denial. When the Second Watchman reminds his lover, “Your body was inside my body. Your arms great chains tightening around me. Nothing existed but you inside me...”, the First Watchman angrily demands a retraction: “DID I EVER COME TO YOUR BED?” (1994: 101). Their relationship, which gradually becomes more honest, is set alongside that of a passionate heterosexual couple, over whom they keep watch, from beyond the grave. Once again, as in *Black Sunlight*, racial identity, place and time are all indeterminate.

When they first met, Grace had been powerfully attracted to Rita, without knowing why. The tall slender, boyish girl who apparently cared about nothing at all under the sun - except Tony... When she opened the door and it was Rita, their bodies *knew*. A totally physical terrible ecstasy [*sic*]. A spark of blue leaping from Grace to Rita. And there was nothing to explain. Nothing to feel ashamed about. Everything was so right. Rita had cooked a meal and Grace spread the table and they ate facing one another like two people who had been living together for a long time.

When Grace woke up the next morning, she found Rita's side of the bed empty. Violent delicious tears spurted out of her eyes. And she stood naked before the full-length mirror, crying. Crying for the symbolic restoration of her body, which from four years old she had never believed whole (1984: 68-70).

Through this same-sex encounter, Grace reclaims ownership of her own body in defiance of a patriarchal culture, which has declared the enjoyment of sex by women (especially for non-procreative purposes) to be utterly perverse. Finally she is able to reject conservative society's concept of womanhood and set about redefining it for herself. Given that lesbianism is usually depicted as deviant in African literature (if it is mentioned at all), Marechera's sympathetic rendering is a landmark. Significantly, no-one is punished for the transgression, there is no mention of shame, and there are no negative consequences. Instead, both women find pleasure and respect and Grace finally finds self-worth.¹¹⁰ Marechera's writing is noticeably less anxious in affirming its depictions of female homosexuality.

In *Confessions of A Rusty Dread: Hammered Yet Again by a Nail* (an unpublished, incomplete novel written in the mid-1980s), Marechera again addresses homosexuality, as he explores transgressions especially of masculine sexuality. (A Rusty Dread is a

¹¹⁰ In "The Skin of Time: Plays by Buddy", a carnivalesque drama in the same collection. Marechera also makes fleeting reference to an incestuous bisexual interracial orgy. Here again, homosexuality is an unstable signifier (1984: 24).

Rasta with dreadlocks. Marechera was a part of this marginalised subculture). The loosely-formed narrative is written in the first person. It charts the reflections and day to day life a Rastafarian (another version of the author himself) as he moves within the bohemian circles of Harare society. With a startlingly honest tone, the narrative exposes masculine anxiety, and in doing so ruffles the ideological certainties of classic masculinity. Talking to his friend Sally, the Rusty Dread confesses that as a young adolescent he had a fear of “Growing breasts like my sisters. They used to tell me endless horrible stories about what was happening to my body. The odd thing was I also wanted to be like them” (Marechera n.d.: 10). Sally laughs and says, in a problematic equation of homosexuality with female identification, “I’m trying to imagine you as a gay” (10). The Rusty Dread indulges her joke briefly but then, somewhat anxiously, reaffirms his heterosexuality. Nevertheless, the motif later returns when he remembers his sister Rosemary “[t]ouching my chest, telling me I was turning into a girl” (12), then showing him “pictures of men with breasts (Later I knew the men were bodybuilders and weightlifters)” (12). When, as a young boy, he declares, “I don’t want to be a girl!”, Rosemary spitefully tries to confuse him: “Teacher says when people say anything they actually mean the opposite of what they are saying. So *there*” (12).

This is the childhood background to the Rusty Dread’s current uncertainty, regarding his masculine identity. He recalls “sweet Rose murmuring: You’re a *girl!*” (15) as he is in the throes of a three-way sexual encounter with two women, Sally and Monica. These words ring in his ears, as he describes “Sally fucking me up the arse with an electric dildo” (15). It is a scandalous confession, especially since it comes from a black heterosexual Zimbabwean man – a transgression of seismic proportions in Zimbabwean literature. A woman penetrating a man turns the ideology of classic masculinity inside out. The male/female, active/passive, domination/submission formula of heteronormativity is reversed in this brief episode. In his famous essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, Leo Bersani argues “To be penetrated is to abdicate power” (1987: 212). Especially within cultures of machismo, as in Zimbabwe, this notion holds true.¹¹¹ (Moreover, adding to the transgression, we are left in a state of uncertainty as to the

¹¹¹ Nevertheless I disagree with Bersani’s apparent assumption that this is a universal and consistent experience regarding receptive anal sex. In fact, I contend it could be experienced as the exact opposite – a form of self-empowerment.

racial identity of Sally and Monica and whether or not they engage in lesbian sex with each other.)

Inconsistently, however, Marechera later returns to a more stereotypical representation of homosexuality, when the Rusty Dread drinks at the Playboy club with Fritzpatrick, a gay Irish doctor, apparently working for the SADF (South African Defence Force). The Rusty Dread, who is at times prone to paranoia, suspects Fritzpatrick of being an intelligence agent. Nevertheless they hold a friendly conversation:

It was some minutes before I became aware of a young black guy who was glowering at me. Fritzpatrick made to introduce us but the dude shrugged him off accusingly like a girl irritated by her boyfriend flirting for too long with one person. Fritz explained: He's my boyfriend – Come over, man, say hello to the writer. But the guy flounced off and out of the nightclub (25)

The Rusty Dread, despite his anti-racism, seems ambivalent about Fritzpatrick's possible allegiances with the apartheid regime. Inconsistent with the ideology of apartheid, in any event, is Fritz's interracial homosexual relationship - apparently genuine, in view of the boyfriend's portrayal as a jealous lover.

Seemingly at ease in gay company, the Rusty Dread reflects on his attitude towards homosexuality and confesses:

There was a certain satisfaction in talking about forbidden subjects. Sexually, I didn't mind. A lot of my friends in London were either gay or lesbian and it was a matter of pride to deal with sexual matters with utter frankness so that one would not be misunderstood. I wasn't gay and I said so and that cleared the air. I even became a kind of counsellor for whenever my friends had problems - they did have problems not a hundred yards different from the agonies of heterosexuals. I had had two gay experiences; one when I and my best friend in primary school sneaked off into the bush to experiment on each other's bums, taking turns at passive and active roles. The other was with Nick. I had just been expelled from the university and I was waiting for a chance to flee the country. Nick was a sixth form student who'd recently been released from detention for political activities. Drink and talk; talk and drink – suicide was a perpetual topic

in our desperate conversations over a plastic mug of sour beer. He didn't have anywhere to stay: I asked him home but sometimes he would prefer to walk the night out like he was trying to outrun his lifespan [*sic*]. One night we were quite drunk and hopeless and hating everything and anyone it seemed as natural as gooseberries to sleep together. When I woke up he'd disappeared. I never saw him after that (25).

This candid account, written in the first person, goes into uncharted terrain, admitting same-sex experimentation and exploring the convergence of close male friendship and sexual intimacy. Again, with Marechera, sex and sexual orientation are not fixed and permanent markers of identity, but shifting and unpredictable. This, an unfinished, experimentalist piece of writing, is more evidence of Marechera ahead of his time, focusing on 'forbidden subjects', problematising the strictures of classic masculinity, undermining compulsory heterosexuality and exploring male sexuality in its multiple dimensions.

Nevertheless, in the Rusty Dread's confessions, classic masculine anxieties creep through. He feels the need to pre-empt his disclosures by affirming, firstly, a heterosexual identity: "I wasn't gay and I said so and that cleared the air." The 'gay' primary school experience is explained as curious childhood experimentation. In the affair with Nick, sexual intimacy is partly accounted for by drunkenness and desperation. The fact that Nick disappeared and the Rusty Dread never saw him again suggests possible embarrassment after the encounter, and avoidance of its consequences. Also, the confession is suddenly terminated (by an urgent message about the arrest of a friend) before further possible disclosures.

Marechera's blurring of boundaries between fiction and autobiography in this first person narrative effectively personalises questions of sexual orientation. This introspective consideration of queer sexuality is as yet unattempted by other Zimbabwean authors. There are several examples, in his posthumously published and unpublished writing, where Marechera considers sexual orientation in the subjective.

His first person identification with and analysis of queer sexuality contrasts with the 'objective' analysis of homosexuals and homosexuality by the other authors considered.

Nyamfukudza, in his naturalistic style, represents homosexuality without the judgement of Mungoshi. However, the only image we have with Nyamfukudza is disturbingly close to the 'deviancy' stereotype: the prison environment reinforces homosexuality's association with criminality and it is suggested this behaviour would not ordinarily occur elsewhere. An othering of homosexuality therefore takes place, working to uphold heteronormativity. Madanhire, in a more experimental style, incorporating dream, fantasy and myth, is able to access some of the more interesting dimensions of sexual orientation, as well as its consequences for personal identity. However, despite sympathetic narration, he too considers homosexuality in the objective. Both Madanhire and Mungoshi focalise their narratives through female protagonists and consider the implications of male homosexuality for married women. Madanhire, particularly, problematises classic constructions of femininity in an insightful manner. Marechera, through Grace, does the same in "Grimknife Jr's Story". Mungoshi begins to touch on these issues but then invokes closure.

The unusual project of male authors vicariously inhabiting the bodies and minds of women can be read as an exercise in textual transvestism. (Marechera's male narrator, who closely identifies with Grace's sexual awakening, in "Grimknife Jr's Story", is perhaps the most interesting in this regard, in view of comments in "Confessions of the Rusty Dread" regarding that narrator's feminine fears and identifications.) But focalising on homosexuality and its implications from a woman's perspective can also be read, in the case of Mungoshi especially, as a means of dispersing the implications of male homosexuality for men, avoiding unsettling considerations of its meaning for masculine identity. The questioning of classic masculinity, begun in the late 1970s by Marechera and apparently exacerbated by the gay debates of the mid-1990s, continues to be registered into the new millennium in Zimbabwean fiction. Another highly significant text is Chinodya's *Can We Talk and Other Stories* (1998).

Shimmer Chinodya

Chinodya is the only other major author, besides Marechera, to have explored the theme of cross-dressing in Zimbabwean literature. (I will discuss Marechera's representation of this shortly). In *Can We Talk*, the narrator/ author, writes a narrative to his wife, Shaz, from whom he is painfully estranged. Reminiscing about special moments in their past relationship, in a semi-humorous anecdote, he confesses the following:

I don't sneak any more into lady's shops to ask, 'Do you think this will fit my wife? When I travel out of the country I don't squeeze my hairy, clumsy body into trim ladies' dresses and prance in front of hotel room mirrors, smirking to myself, 'This will definitely fit you. Wait till you see this!' There is *nobody* for me to squeeze into women's dresses for. There is no body for me to please. Nobody to impress. And when you flung that wardrobeful of dresses into my face that morning after we spent the night quarrelling and you shouted, 'I don't want these any more! You can have them back! you hurt me deep, my dear (2001: 129).

For the narrator, women's clothes are a means of communication: "I had never been a talker to you but those dresses were my voice," he says, and "I was the artist shaping you, painting you, exploring textures, fabrics and colours on you" (129). The narrator's confession of a desire to put on women's clothes, to identify with femininity (though it is explained, somewhat unconvincingly, as just admiration), is scandalous in the context of macho Zimbabwean culture - though of course also funny.

But there is a more serious side to it as well. Significantly, the narrator only ever cross-dresses "out of the country" and in the privacy of a hotel room. The ritual, therefore, is carefully planned – more than just a joke. Though he likes to "prance in front of hotel mirrors", these performances (until he discloses them to the reader) are only ever witnessed by himself. His cross-dressing is a secret not shared with his wife Shaz until after the estrangement, when he realises, painfully, that he has admired the "textures, fabrics and colours" of the feminine attire much more than her.

The narrator tries to affirm, rather than unsettle, classic masculinity with his ridiculous images: the "hairy, clumsy body" obviously can't be feminine, he can't really be a woman, etc. - or so it is suggested. Despite the humorous tomfoolery, however, the account exposes a fracturing in classic masculinity, revealing curiosity in transvestism, crossing the socially constructed masculine-feminine divide.

The narrator later exposes further feelings of inadequacy in his sense of masculine identity. He recounts the debacle of his affair with a younger married woman, Monica. The two are caught by the police, having sex in a car on the roadside. The narrator's

wife is called to police station after they find his identity card, and his telephone number in the phone book. This transgression, the result of loneliness, sexual frustration and a need for communication, precipitates in catastrophe for all parties involved. The narrator has to make a humiliating phone call to Monica's husband, where he is not entitled to speak, but obliged to listen to a lecture. As part of his punishment, the narrator is made to eat humble pie by the cuckolded husband, who is not bothered about the affair itself, except that he now needs to regain lost masculine esteem. He does so by feminising (lecturing, chastising, and silencing) his 'rival'.

The narrator survives in the aftermath of the affair with his masculine pride in tatters. Caught so dramatically, literally with his pants down, there is nothing to do but confess and apologise. Chinodya's story becomes brutally critical about the state of masculine culture in Zimbabwe:

Early in life, we men begin by relishing our sins and proudly cataloguing our exploits but after a while we get bored of our deeds. We get bored, but we don't stop. Yes, we men are children. Yes, there is a polygamous streak in every one of us. Yes, six out of every ten of our thoughts are sex-related. Yes, half of us are probably sex maniacs. Yes, we drive around the avenues at night, flashing our headlights. Yes, we have girlfriends tucked away in high-density houses. Yes, we have secret children mothered by teenage girls. Yes, we can't feed ourselves. Yes, we don't care for the children that we spawn. Yes, we are irresponsible. Yes, we are rapists. Yes, we are wife-batterers. Yes, we spread AIDS. Yes, we don't last five years after our spouses die. Yes, we are weaker than women.

Yes, yes, yes.

So, I'm a sell out, aren't I? Blaming men. Writing this unthinkable story. Shaming myself like this (136-137).

With this account, Chinodya delivers a bombshell to a complacent classic masculinity. Such a devastating admission of the ugly face of masculinity, coming from a man, is unprecedented in Zimbabwean literature. Chinodya's self-reflexive text, with its confessions of cross-dressing, male pain, weakness and vulnerability, exemplifies a moment of crisis in masculine culture, and represents a possible turning point in men's writing – the beginnings of a thorough re-evaluation of gender identity. Contentiously, however, it implies an essential maleness, which entails a dependency on women, that

cannot be changed, just confessed to. But it also returns us to reflections on the nature of selfhood.

Issues of personal identity are common to all of the queer-themed texts considered, and sexuality is central to each. If, as Marechera suggests, identity is a fiction, then imaginative literature seems the obvious place, private and somewhat free, to investigate sexual identity, which is increasingly held in Zimbabwe – culturally and personally – as one of the most important markers of social and personal ‘truth’. The queer themes I have analysed are nearly all linked with an often anxious questioning of selfhood, and an interrogation of classic masculinity or traditional femininity. Frequently they are a re-negotiation of these.

Marechera’s queer representations are the most numerous, self-reflexive and significant to date. However, they are also the most unsettling in that he posits the notion of fundamental inconsistency in sexual identity. Unlike the narrators in Nyamfukudza’s, Madanhire’s, Mungoshi’s and Chinodya’s texts, Marechera’s narrator/ protagonist self-consciously betrays uncertainty about the nature of sexual orientation and gender identification. Also, with Marechera, same-sex desire and same-sex relations do not necessarily tie his characters down to straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual identities: sexual orientation is unstable and unpredictable. He therefore raises key issues for queer studies: if a consistent sexual identification can never be taken as a foregone conclusion, then constructing a theory and politics around sexual orientation becomes an inherently fraught task. Marechera diverges even further from standard representations in his treatment of transvestism.

5. Beyond Transgression: Cross-Dressing and Radical Ambivalence in Marechera

Marechera had a suitcase of costumes, from which he selected outfits for various public appearances when he knew he would be in the limelight. Appended is an image of the author in the much-photographed black tee-shirt, entitled “The Voice (Britain’s Largest Black Newspaper)”, underneath a Laura Ashley-type floral woman’s jacket. Needless to say, this is an unusual juxtapositioning of styles and can be considered a transgressive gesture in cross-dressing.¹¹² But for Marechera dressing up was not confined to gender bending. It mainly took other forms and there are a number of stories.

To receive his award for *The House of Hunger* at the Guardian Prize Giving Ceremony in 1979, for instance, he arrived in a bright red Basutho-looking poncho and a broad-brimmed black hat. The ‘ethnic’ image of the poncho clashed startlingly with the slightly cowboy-styled hat; and the outfit was further offset by a huge copy of Pound’s *The Cantos*, which Marechera displayed prominently when he was photographed, as if determined to further complicate his image with yet another inconsistent cultural reference. (Pound of course, with his high modernism as well as his alleged misogyny, and fascist sympathies, presents a controversial case of his own). Marechera complained, according to *West Africa* magazine, that “an African writer was expected to write only about Africa” (Veit-Wild 1992: 189). His clashing costume visually conveyed an adamant refusal to be pigeonholed as an ‘African writer’.¹¹³

Another notable dressing up performance was at the first Zimbabwean Independence Day celebrations at the Africa Centre, London in 1980. Simon Bright recalls:

Marechera looked very smart. He was wearing a complete riding outfit with jodhpurs, black jacket, boots and a bowler hat. He stood out because everybody else was very patriotic-looking: a black Zimbabwean dressed like an English lord about to go on a fox-hunt, with a pseudo upper class English accent plus a slight stammer... While we tried to be very African and dressed in ethnic clothes.

¹¹² My thanks to Ranka Primorac for pointing this out to me – something I had always overlooked. According to Veit-Wild in a telephone interview (15 March, 2003), the jacket may at one stage have been hers. She did not remember precisely. However, she noted that Marechera would simply pick up whatever was lying around, as if unconsciously, just because he needed something to wear. In fact, the transgression is all the more interesting if, as Veit-Wild suggests, it was unconscious.

¹¹³ See picture (Veit-Wild 1992: 190). This was just the beginning of an evening of high drama: he later hurled saucers at the chandeliers and reduced many well-meaning liberals to tears with allegations of hypocrisy (Veit-Wild 1992: 188-190).

there was this black fellow making a mockery of English lords and Africans at the same time (Veit-Wild 1992: 247).

Even on this historic occasion, Marechera once again asserted his ambivalence, and demonstrated a refusal to observe protocol.

The costumed performances continued in post-independence Zimbabwe, where Marechera's long-awaited return was a grand and unexpectedly 'posh' entrance. He stepped off the plane in Harare in a three-piece suit and tie – something he never wore in all his years in exile in London.¹¹⁴ It was boiling hot in Harare and the flashy suit and tie were quite incongruous with the African environment, as well as his reputation amongst enthusiastic supporters of the author as a poor township writer and a proletarian voice.

Fixed ideas of ethnicity, class, and gender were the targets for Marechera's disruptions; and he was clearly interested in the destabilising potential of transvestism. To some extent this overturning of expected roles fits the frame of the carnival or of Menippean satire, evident in other post-independence works such as *Mindblast*, discussed in the introduction and Chapter One.

Marjorie Garber describes cross-dressing and its effect in terms of a "category crisis":

a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave. The binarism male/female, one apparent ground of distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between "This and "that" and "him" and "me", is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism (1992: 16).

For Garber, transvestism becomes emblematic of unsustainable categorical divisions. Garber's term "category crisis" describes Marechera's strategy with regard to his deliberate blurring of racial boundaries in *Black Sunlight* (and much of his subsequent work), where, as is previously noted, it is often impossible to tell whether a character is

¹¹⁴ He also kissed the soil like a native son, only to curse it moments later on his way into the city from the airport, saying, "I can't stay. I don't belong here any more" (Veit-Wild 1992: 283). See photo (284).

black or white. Especially after 1980, but even before, Marechera had become frustrated with a literature that fixed identity according to race, and sought to change that with his own writing. He had also begun, increasingly, to destabilise the ideology of classic masculinity. Wearing the floral woman's jacket is one indication of this (conscious or unconscious) tendency.

Through fiction, Marechera followed the trope of transvestism further and delved deeper. Garber's observations regarding transvestism and 'category crisis' are useful though ultimately inadequate to describe his project, which exceeds the disruption of categories to expresses a more radical ambivalence. With Marechera, this is characterised by the co-existence within one person (often the author himself as well as his characters) of seemingly opposite characteristics, feelings and identifications.

Bhabha's theory of mimicry is possibly more helpful: "The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (1994: 86). Marechera's personal performances illustrate some of the extremes to which he would go to express dissent, difference and disruption. This style of mimicry is also evident as a strategy in his post-independence writing. It is true the author mocks the colonial master and belittles master narratives, and in doing so produces "ambivalence", "slippage" and "excess". Yet Bhabha's theoretical frame fails, ultimately, to account for Marechera's complex project. Marechera goes further: he transgresses his own transgressions. Current theory and criticism does not ultimately provide an adequate interpretive framework for the radical ambivalence Marechera was asserting. His personal performances lend clues to a writing style that goes beyond transgression. *The Alley*, a play employing transvestism as a theatrical device, is a case in point.

The Alley

The Alley was written in the mid-1980s but rejected for publication until 1994, and has, as yet, never been performed on stage. It has also suffered critical neglect, which is a glaring omission in view of its profound relevance to the current Zimbabwean predicament. However, considering the play's capacity to unsettle and offend, this is perhaps not surprising. It ploughs the national unconscious to throw up some of the most unpleasant memories and uncover painful traumas that lurk beneath a surface

reality that now attempts to deny these. For Pattison, who briefly reviews the play in his book, it is “an insane mixture of the tragic and the absurd” (2001: 171) and “an intense expression of Marechera’s troubled view of human life and human society in contemporary Zimbabwe” (175). Pattison, who sees *The Alley* as an expressionist drama, suggests it is yet another product of Marechera’s troubled mind. Missing from his account, however, is recognition of Marechera’s unique ability to tap into a troubled *national* psyche and strike a poignant chord. The play is disturbing, not because it is an “insane” and “troubled” view from an eccentric mind but because it fuses fact with fiction so disturbingly, returning the reader/viewer, in a uniquely Marecheran manner, to the scene of unspeakable horrors that have scarred the unconscious of the Zimbabwean nation – actual wartime atrocities.

The Alley is without a doubt the most complex drama to have emerged from post-independence Zimbabwe. It is a commentary on violent conflict and its aftermath, tackling thorny issues of race, gender and sexuality simultaneously, as it shifts disconcertingly between the exterior world and an interior one. I begin with a descriptive analysis of the play, partly because it is an unfamiliar text, but also to demonstrate its complicated psychical dimensions. I will then focus on transvestism and its part in a project that goes beyond transgression.

There is a disconcerting juxtaposition of the real and surreal in this play; and often it is difficult to make clear distinctions between the two. As it opens, “we can hear the sounds of a city awakening: the roar of buses, cars; someone selling newspapers” (Marechera 1994: 33). Day to day reality in Harare is the background that offsets the strange existence of two down-and-out tramps, who are often drunk and delusional. Rhodes is a poor black tramp while Robin is his white compatriot, with whom he is stuck, forever it seems, in an alley. The setting is surreal and it recalls Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir and Estragon, also two tramps, are similarly suspended in an absurd situation. However, *The Alley* differs from Beckett’s play in that it is specific – sharply attuned to the painful peculiarities of the Zimbabwean experience.

Robin and Rhodes are both former law partners, but now ex-convicts and outcasts. Robin has just been released from Chikurubi (maximum security) prison. Inescapable on stage is the omnipresent wall, an ambiguous and unsettling symbol, which grows in significance as the play progresses. What lies behind it is a mystery, “a crematorium?”

Robin speculates, “Or one of those secret offices where germicidal decisions are made? A conspirator’s den perhaps?” (38). At times it is a mysterious barrier that separates the conscious from the unconscious, the day to day world from the dream-world. It represents a multitude of divisions, conjures suspicion and paranoia, and is the hiding place of atrocities from the past that weigh heavily on the present consciousness.

It emerges Robin has been defending a sexual assault charge. Memories of the alleged incident resurface to haunt him. In a jumbled narrative, he declares: “I wasn’t doing anything to the boy. His trousers-” (39). Suddenly, believing Rhodes to have shopped him to the authorities (which is why he ended up at Chikurubi prison), Robin threatens to kill his former partner, taking up an iron bar. But Rhodes persuades him to strike the wall first because there is something behind it. A girl’s voice screams from offstage: “Daddy, no! no! No! Daddy!” (40). It is an unwelcome flashback to an ugly chapter in Robin’s life where, it quickly becomes clear, he sexually abused his daughter, Judy. This is torture for Robin: “[In agony, as though wounding himself, [he] strikes the wall]” (40) until the sounds cease.

The drama then flashes back, in the second scene, to the Chimurenga war. The actor playing Rhodes cross-dresses to play Cecilia Rhodes. S/he is a black woman fighting against the Rhodesians, represented by Robin (who plays a torturing officer). Cecilia is captured and sexually assaulted by Robin, who imagines her as his daughter Judy, before she manages to shoot and kill him and is in turn killed in a shootout with other Rhodesian militia. (We later, in Scene Three, discover she was Rhodes’s sister.) The action is gruesome and graphic. Memories of domestic sexual abuse seep into a scene of wartime violence as the play delves through layer upon layer of buried trauma – both personal and national.

After a blackout a spotlight returns to Robin, and the scene ends with his daughter Judy “[screaming in long surrendering anguish]: Oh daddy, no, no, no, no, NO!” (43). This is disturbing to say the least. Robin “[savagely attacking the wall]” but unable to muffle the scream, falls into a trance-like state: “[In utter self-knowledge he hurls the iron bar to the ground]” and says “BITCH! BITCH!” (43). Although he is the perpetrator of heinous misogynistic and racist violence, he is also a victim of his own crimes, in that they return to haunt him: “[A broken sound issues from deep within his chest – a daemonic discord – he throws himself to the ground, crouches on all fours and like a

severely wounded animal, in its death throes prances around the Alley smashing everything in his path]" (43).

In Scene Three, we return to the Alley at noon. Robin is still asleep and "[He seems to be having nightmares, muttering about someone called Judy or Cecilia]" (43). It now becomes clear to the audience, if it was not before, that the previous scene has been a terrible nightmare – a journey into Robin's troubled unconscious mind. Rhodes, dressed as a man again, enters with cheap wine and a loaf of bread to tell him "It's all in your mind" (43). In the plain light of day, they discuss the war, or rather, as Rhodes says, how "It's indecent to remind ourselves of all that...of genocide at Chimoio, the unbelievable massacres at Nyadzonya, the callous mass executions at Rusape" (44). (This is an uncomfortable rub with reality: these are all actual sites where mass graves were discovered.) But the atrocities cannot ultimately be forgotten. The thousands who died in the war, as Rhodes says, can still be heard behind the wall. Cecilia, he assures Robin, is "dead but not forgotten" (45).

Finally, it is Rhodes's turn to see surreal visions, to reconnect with the dead: "Your daughter, Judy, is right there with [Cecilia]," he tells Robin: "She's kissing Cecilia. They are very much in love with each other. What you did to both of them left them with nothing but sheer disgust for men" (45). In Rhodes's vision they are taunting and haunting Robin from the grave in an interracial 'lesbian' liaison. This is the ultimate renunciation of everything Robin and the Rhodesians fought for – the most emphatic rejection of racial patriarchy and masculinist heteronormative culture. But Robin accuses Rhodes of malevolent game-playing: "What are you trying to do to my mind?" (45). Although Rhodes replies "*You* are doing it yourself" (45) he is also, obviously, feeding his partner's neurosis – consciously or unconsciously.

In another complicated twist of the plot, Rhodes reveals that he was a ZANLA medic during the war, tells Robin he "cleaned up after you," and explains, "That's how I found my sister [Cecilia]. And that's how I found out about you...That's why I have stuck by you all these years" (45). He has befriended his sister's torturer, it seems, with the intention of exacting revenge.¹¹⁵ Suddenly Robin's dream world and paranoid imagination become more credible as his suspicions are substantiated by Rhodes's disclosures. As if suddenly struck by a revelation, Robin accuses Rhodes of having

¹¹⁵ This familiar wartime theme is addressed in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

murdered Judy, “a pure, innocent beautiful thing until your comrades did things to her and slit her throat” (45). He “makes a perfect swing” (46), with the clear intention of killing his tormentor, but then he “sees something in Rhodes’s face and throws away the bar” (46). Stopping in his tracks, and deep in thought, he says, “Know what’s wrong? It’s the Alley itself. Never knew any other country with such an ability to run men into beasts. Rhodes, let’s drink. Let’s eat. I know one day we’ll try to kill each other again but I call it quits for today. I’m just going to get drunk” (46). Rhodes says, ambivalently, “Don’t mind me” (46). These are the final words of a play that resolves none of its unsettling issues and concludes, in typical absurdist tradition, by introducing further uncertainty. For Rhodes and Robin there is a sense of resignation at the end of the play that there will always be conflict, and yet they are condemned to live together in a narrow alley, haunted by memories of the past.¹¹⁶

The Alley is, in many respects, about the consequences of colonialist-nationalist struggle and the enduring conflict. The name Rhodes is a constant reminder of a cursed legacy. Early in the play, Robin says:

But Rhodes was always there even when he was not there. Did you know his statue is still lurking around somewhere covered in brambles and weeds in the Botanical Gardens? Honest [*Thoughtfully*] We’ll never be free of the bastard! [*Looks at Rhodes, surprised*] YOU are here – what did I tell you! [*Drinks wildly*] Drink is the only medicine that can drive him from my mind. [Pause] Can you tell me where I am? (35).

With a one-word answer, “Harare” (35), Rhodes (the character) takes the delusional Robin back to postcolonial reality, where the haunting, however, continues. Despite his disgraceful relegation to the backyard of history in the new Zimbabwean nation, Rhodes (the historical figure) endures as a symbol, a reminder of the continuing disarrangement that has resulted from colonialism - not only geographic and social but also psychological.

¹¹⁶ Athol Fugard’s *Playland* (1992), penned several years after *The Alley*, yet published two years earlier, also addresses racial conflict, war and atrocity, but in a South African context. Set in an amusement park in the Karoo, it centres on a dialogue between Martinus, a black man who has killed a white man, and Gideon, a white man who has killed twenty-seven black men fighting for SWAPO, and who now seeks atonement. Although there are striking thematic parallels, *The Alley* takes its antirealism a step further, ventures deeper into the psychosexual, and destabilises the idea of a fundamental moral truth which *Playland* seems to uphold. Also relevant are Fugard’s *The Island* and Paul Herzberg’s *The Dead Weight*.

Violent armed struggle gave birth to an independent nation, but wartime experiences, such as that expressed in Robin's nightmare, seared the consciousness of the nation indelibly. The literary scene in Zimbabwe in the 1980s was characterised by an outpouring of war stories. *The Alley* shifts outside the social realist genre, which predominates in Zimbabwean war fiction, to give a more complex, inwardly focused, psychoanalytical view. It can be read as a play about race relations, past and present, about skeletons in the cupboard, and about coming to terms with a painful past.¹¹⁷

Written in the early 1980s in the wake of the Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland (about which any public discussion was strictly forbidden), there is an eerie feeling in this play of history repeating itself in a cruel and absurd manner. Thousands of people 'disappeared' in a government clampdown on 'dissident' activity in Matabeleland in the early 1980s. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe published a report many years after the events. This gives grisly details of shocking sex crimes and genocidal atrocities, which were in fact sanctioned by the Mugabe government. The CCJPZ states that:

Many people, possibly thousands, who were either victims of physical torture, or forced to witness it, continue to suffer psychological disorders indicative of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Such disorders as unexplained anxieties, dizziness, insomnia, hypochondria, and a permanent fear and distrust of senior government officials are evident in the victims. Typically, such victims pass on their stress to their children and create a heavy extra burden on existing health structures (CCJPZ 1997: 6-7)

Indirectly, yet perceptively, *The Alley* speaks of these experiences long before they were disclosed. It furthermore implies, with its blurring of racial categories and gender distinctions, that ethnic and gendered violence are part of an ongoing irrational cycle.¹¹⁸ As Rhodes and Robins' complex relationship illustrates, racial conflict does not end at

¹¹⁷ Unlike South Africa, there was no Truth and Reconciliation Commission in newly independent Zimbabwe. It has not been possible to talk freely about the war, and atrocities of the past remain engulfed in silence.

¹¹⁸ This is also a theme in Marechera's unfinished novel *The Concentration Camp*, contained in *Scrapiron Blues* (1994).

the point of ceasefire, the transfer of power and talk of reconciliation. Rather, it continues to re-enact itself in the unconscious. The figure of the transvestite, onto whom psychosexual trauma is projected by Robin, dramatises this point.

The character of Rhodes is a multitude of contradictions - a black tramp with a white imperialist's name, an ex-convict, a former lawyer, a transvestite, a symbol of Rhodesia, a dead woman, and a ghost behind the wall in an interracial lesbian embrace, as well as an ex-ZANLA medic. Rhodes is also a semi-autobiographical version of Marechera: "I was born at Rusape – Vengere Township – and you guys reduced my home to acres of mass graves," he states (43-4). The place of birth, at least, is factual, though the rest is fictionalised. There are surprising twists to Rhodes's complex, changeable character.

With dramatic irony, Marechera features the contradictions. Robin, with a faltering memory and "[through a fog of alcohol]" (33) says, "If you're him, you've sure got one hell of a suntan" (34). Strangely, it is Robin, the white tramp, who is haunted by the spectre of Rhodes, tormented by various images of him, which shift kaleidoscopically in his troubled mind. He says, "[Like a revelation] Rhodes was black and a Jew to boot. The snivelling sneaking slimy snot-nosed fucking bastard. Made millions out here and left me to face the firing squad" (34). Robin's remarks are of course highly offensive but, through Robin's absurd hostility, Marechera seems to deride the illogicality, the nonsensical nature of racism and anti-Semitism.

Bhabha's notion of "a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable" (1994: 87-9) is relevant to Marechera's representation of Rhodes. In *The Alley*, it seems as if he has plucked the arch-imperialist out of history, turned him black, re-assigned his gender and placed him in the most extraordinary of situations. In this manner, the founding father of the former Rhodesia is of course being mocked, but this is not a simple case of derision; and it breaks with standard forms of mimicry.

Rhodes's apparent effeminacy was often dramatised for effect in anti-apartheid South African fringe theatre in the 1980s. At the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in 1987, I saw an improvised play where Cecil Rhodes was played by a woman with a high-pitched whining voice. Whilst belittling the imperialist project, which seemed its primary intention, this play nevertheless fell into the paradigm of structural critical

homophobia and effeminaphobia. In other words, Rhodes's alleged 'queerness' was problematically linked with his perverse colonial ambitions. Here, Marechera's characterisation of Rhodes – in a drama written the same time as anti-apartheid plays south of the border – is radically different. It resists any such interpretation. 'Queerness' is not being mocked at all, nor is it in any way connected with a 'perverse' imperial mission. That is not the point of Marechera's drama.

With Marechera, Cecilia Rhodes is the embodiment of ambivalence – a transvestite on stage, a figure in Robin's nightmare, but also a 'real' black woman, fighting against the Rhodesians. There are no stage directions to indicate the role of Cecilia should be played mockingly. On the contrary s/he elicits sympathy and (possibly) audience identification because s/he represents a popular cause and is, after all, the victim of appalling abuse.

There are few traces of effeminaphobia in the characterisation of Cecilia. However, there is a misogynistic loathing on the part of Robin for Cecilia's womanhood and what it is held to represent. Robin "dramatically points at the map of Rhodesia" and tells her "That's what's between your legs...I'm going to fuck it out of your mind" (41). S/he thereby becomes a complicated symbol of the nation, though there is some confusion as to whether s/he represents the white Rhodesian nation (given her name) or the embryonic Zimbabwean nation. Again s/he is an ambivalent figure. Robin sees her as the latter, but wants to restore her, violently, to the former: "We'll screw the ancestors out of you," he says, "screw Mwari out of you, and your God will be the Big White Cock!" (41). This is a return to the psychosexual battle for domination – Robin representing colonialism wishing to re-master Cecilia, for the moment representing African nationalism. Mwari is the male spirit who possessed the legendary female spirit medium, Nehanda, in nationalist mythology, and thereby inspired the first and second Chimurengas.¹¹⁹ Though Cecilia becomes the victim of some of the worst possible racist and misogynist abuse, this is offset by the dramatic irony of 'her' being a 'he', and the absurdity of her/him having the name of the white arch-imperialist.

¹¹⁹ This is a controversial point to make but Nehanda too can be seen as a cross-dresser to the extent that she inhabited the traditionally masculine role of marshalling troops to fight the Rhodesian settlers. She is an androgynous figure in that she is possessed by a male spirit.

Cecilia is forced to sit on Robin's lap, to substitute in his memory for his daughter during a moment of sexual abuse: "You mustn't ever tell Judy. And when I touch you here and there you must also touch me here and there" (41-2). It is now clearer than ever that s/he is functioning as a figure in Robin's troubled unconscious, yet she is also – outside Robin's problematic projections – an entirely autonomous being. Cecilia plays the part, till, returning to 'reality', Robin says: "Shit! You're bleeding on me, you black bitch" (42).

As Robin moves to rape her, the tables are turned. Cecilia sings at first tragically, then defiantly, as the wall eventually joins her in a "[defiant tumultuous barrage]" (42). She seizes the pistol (a symbol of phallic power) and, as Robin is "[nuzzling her, ripping at her clothes[,] she shoots him point blank in the head]" (42). The song reaches a crescendo and it seems that the wall will burst. Cecilia takes aim at the map of Rhodesia – aiming "straight at the head of the nightmarish creation and guns it down from the wall" (42). Regaining phallic power, she has killed Robin who represents colonialism. But since, in Robin's view at least, she symbolically represents Rhodesia, (both as a feminised version of Rhodes the founding 'father' of Rhodesia and as the new Zimbabwe she is fighting for) this can also be read as act of suicide. The violence spirals, and the symbolism becomes even more complicated, when another Rhodesian soldier bursts in and fires at her with his FN rifle – an act of wartime murder. As Cecilia drops to the ground she manages to shoot him between the eyes too, but more soldiers emerge to fire "[burst after burst into her body as Blackout]" (42). Cecilia Rhodes's sexually abused and bullet-shot body becomes a metaphor for a violated country.

By eliciting nationalist sympathy and identification (against the brutal Rhodesians represented by Robin) and yet somehow representing the arch-imperialist himself or herself, Cecilia Rhodes disorients the viewer. Through Cecilia, Marechera switches the signposts in the dominant signifying system.

Familiar representational markers of Rhodes and what he traditionally stands for are inverted or subverted throughout the play. Speaking of their business relationship, as partners in law, Rhodes says "in the firm, I was the brains and you were the action" (36). This alludes to and subverts the ethos of the 'real' Rhodes, who considered himself and the European colonisers to be the brains and African labour to be the action in his imperial project. There is a well-known statue of a horse and a horseman, entitled

“Physical Energy”, sculpted by C.G Watts. It used to command a prominent position on Jameson Avenue, Salisbury (now Samora Machel Avenue, Harare) during the colonial period, but was removed after independence, not surprisingly, because it was deemed offensive. The statue is now at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, and can also be seen at the Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town as well as in Hyde Park, London. It is to this monument, no doubt, that Marechera’s Rhodes makes oblique and sardonic reference. In the standard colonialist interpretation of “Physical Energy” blacks were envisaged as the horse and whites as the horseman. Here, however, Rhodes is black and Robin is white, which inverts the symbol confusingly.

Continuing with the motif of mounted animals, the play highlights another sexualised trope that has underlain the racial conflict in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe: “the game we tried during the war of mounting each other like dogs in severe heat has not yet been settled.” (46), Rhodes tells Robin. The image is of a black dog and a white dog driven by an incessant desire to get the better of one another, to assert sexual domination (a familiar feature in the predominant discourse of interracial sexuality, discussed in Chapter One). Robin has tried to dominate Cecilia Rhodes through rape. Rhodes has, in revenge, tried to ‘screw’ with Robin’s mind: through Cecilia (who can be read as his alter ego), he vicariously has a lesbian affair with Robin’s daughter. In describing the ‘vision’ (or is it a fantasy?) he adds insult to Robin’s injury, in an apparently deliberate taunt.

Once again, Marechera shows the old structures of race and gender deeply embedded in the national psyche. Interracial sex, involving lesbianism and transvestism, is posited as an alternative but the Cecilia-Judy affair in the afterlife still seems, to a great extent, the product of a vengeful masculinist imagination. With the trope of transvestism Marechera performs a number of transgressions simultaneously.

The Alley not only subverts discreet categories of race, gender and sexuality and destroys binary oppositions, it also challenges the reader/viewer to delve beneath surface perceptions. In trawling the nether regions of unconscious reality, Marechera exposes the complex and often unsightly mechanisms of the psychosexual world, with profound implications for the individual and the Zimbabwean nation. The experience for the reader/audience is frequently unpleasant and the scenes of misogyny, sexual coercion and sexualised violence are no doubt offensive to many. But Marechera digs

up disturbingly recognisable elements of the cultural unconscious for his readers/viewers to contemplate.

The cross-dressing of Marechera's personal performances, and the trope of transvestism in *The Alley*, demonstrate a writer who has moved, in his treatment of race, gender and sexuality, beyond what might be referred to as straightforward transgression into a more complex, multi-dimensional zone of transgression. In *The Alley*, Marechera complicates our understanding of the post-independence Zimbabwean situation and poses a challenge to literary, cultural and queer studies to develop ever-more adaptive theoretical frames and interpretative tools.

6. Conclusions

The idea of a personal sexual identity, based on sexual orientation, is now firmly implanted in the Zimbabwean national consciousness, and it is the issue of homosexuality that has prompted this development. Homosexuality has been dramatically publicised and politicised following the 1995 Book Fair, Mugabe's anti-gay campaign, Banana's sensational sodomy trial, and the President's continuing brushes with Tatchell and other gay and human rights protesters in Europe, North America, and South Africa.

International queer solidarity has energised the Zimbabwean LGBT movement but also produced a tension in that queer issues have now become problematically enmeshed in national politics and international relations. For political reasons, the LGBT community has been a target of abuse in Zimbabwe. At the same time, in the international arena, homophobic insults and allegations by Mugabe have soured British-Zimbabwean relations. Also, a serious failure on the part of the British government to grasp the issues and respond appropriately has contributed significantly to this complex diplomatic fallout. The widespread ignorance regarding homosexuality and its consequent misunderstanding and/or manipulation in the political sphere underscores the urgent need for a more well-informed, sophisticated, non-homophobic critical discourse, sensitive to the specific circumstances of Zimbabwe, capable of disentangling the myriad interrelated issues which have converged problematically around this issue.

This presents a major challenge to progressively-minded Zimbabweanist scholarship. The queer issue in Zimbabwe problematises universalist trends in queer theory, and highlights inadequacies in the idealist strands of the global queer movement. The extraordinary case of Zimbabwe demands attention to its specificity. Moreover, Zimbabwean LGBT issues cannot be fully understood within the interpretative frame currently provided by the South African-dominated regional queer discourse. A queer discourse, mindful of Zimbabwean complexities and particularities, and adapted to the needs of its LGBT community, promises to provide a more useful interpretative frame. Phillips, in legal studies, and Epprecht, in social history studies, have contributed substantially to this discourse, thereby beginning to redress homophobia and heterosexism in Zimbabweanist scholarship. Yet queer discourse is almost entirely

undeveloped in studies of Zimbabwean literature, despite literature being of paramount importance to questions of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Through controversy, literature has been confirmed as a vital site for the exploration and expression of alternative concepts of sexuality. Books and texts, symbolically, became the first major battleground (at the Book Fair) of the LGBT liberation movement. Written texts have, in the past, been the site of the erasure and unsaying of same-sex sexualities, of the reinforcement of classic masculinity, classic femininity, and of a heteronormative idea and ideal of sexuality around which a particular concept of national identity coheres. The dominant fiction, an instrument functioning to retain a patriarchalist, heteronormative status quo, is now being significantly challenged by current LGBT writing.

The furore surrounding homosexuality in Zimbabwe, beginning at the 1995 Book Fair, centres on issues of identity – the assertion of LGBT identities and lifestyles through written texts, and fierce government resistance to a dissemination of these. Personal narratives such as those in the *Sahwira* anthology – contradicting the national narrative of compulsory heterosexuality - are one example of expressing and asserting alternative experiences and identities. The other major development has been arrival of overtly queer characters and themes in Zimbabwean imaginative literature.

There are crucial connections between the queer issue and the crisis in masculinity, which may explain the ferocity of homophobic aggression directed at LGBTs. The queer issue, once a taboo subject, but now more openly debated in Zimbabwe, has precipitated in profound anxiety about masculine identity, both on the cultural and the literary scene. A number of literary texts now register a crisis in traditional masculine and also feminine identity. The tools of queer theory can assist in a critical analysis of this highly significant development in Zimbabwean literature.

Queer discourse, which I have argued is indispensable to Zimbabwean literary and cultural studies, can usefully be developed through an engagement with Marechera – despite (or because of) the complexity he presents. Marechera's early treatment of queer sexuality is significant in that it precedes the marking of sexual orientation, in Zimbabwe, as a category of personal identity. Marechera's unstable concept and representation of sexuality returns us to a more transient, unpredictable, somewhat unsettling idea of sexual orientation (often problematical itself).

Also, Marechera, more so than any other author, demonstrates why literature is vital to questions of sexual orientation and vice versa. Identity, as Marechera illustrates so effectively, can be thought of as a fiction, expressed, constructed, deconstructed or renegotiated in the world of fiction. Hence, masculine and feminine sexual identity can be interrogated, explored, unsettled and recast through writing, especially imaginative literature. The questions posed to masculinity and femininity by queerness are inescapable – as Marechera acknowledges.

Marechera remains the most important writer to date on the subject of queer sexuality. Although Mungoshi's recent queer text has attracted attention, it is deeply problematic. It seems, on the surface, to present a breakthrough, a breaking of the silence on homosexuality. However Mungoshi's recuperation of queer sexuality back into the dominant fiction, where it is punished and where classic masculinity and heteronormativity are reaffirmed, sets a regressive precedent. Less conservatively, Madanhire, a neglected author, dispenses with the 'homosexuality as deviancy' thesis to explore its meaning and long-term implications for personal and national identity. In experimentalist mode, he takes the theme in new, insightful directions, pioneering a more progressive treatment of queer sexuality in contemporary Zimbabwean literature. My argument has been however that not only has Marechera had, and continues to have, a profound effect on radical Zimbabwean writing, but also that his importance can best be assessed by placing him in dialogue with other such writers.

Marechera is significant, when compared with other writers, in that he considers not just the sociological but also the psychical dimensions of queerness. This sets him apart from Mungoshi, who takes more of a sociological view, but in dialogue with Nyamfukudza and Madanhire – who begin to consider the psychological implications of queerness to some extent.

As yet only Marechera has attempted the first person narration of queer experience – a barrier significantly broken, and one which facilitates psychoanalytic introspection. In his writing, he is increasingly inclined to consider queerness seriously and subjectively rather than objectively (as an outside observer) which is the case with Mungoshi, Madanhire and Nyamfukudza. With Marechera, same-sex desire, intimacy and relationships are considered a distinct possibility by the narrator/author of the fictive

text. But the author also demonstrates profound masculine anxieties, at times manifesting in homophobia or 'very heterosexual' overcompensations. Nevertheless, this introspection is one of the most important means by which he destabilises classic masculinity and heteronormativity

Marechera takes the idea that one's sexuality is a crucial marker of one's individual identity and problematises it. He begins, in his writing, to unhinge sexual identity from its socially constructed certainties, to expose its fractures. In *The Alley*, Marechera removes the linchpins of an identification process in a complex overlaying and coalescing of masculine and feminine identities through the figure of transvestism. He takes the trope of queerness (dramatised in Rhodes's transvestism) and subjects it to a radical ambivalence that subverts the idea of stable and cohesive identities. It is in this sense that as well as being a profoundly transgressive writer in relation to heteronormativity, classic masculinity and patriarchy, I have argued that Marechera goes 'beyond transgression'.

Marechera is indispensable to the development of a textured and reflexive queer discourse, catering to the specificities of the Zimbabwean experience. He brings an invaluable, though complex, psychoanalytical perspective, always relevantly, to this discourse. Yet he also remains a thorn in its side, relentlessly inconsistent, constantly spilling out of theoretical frames, persistently throwing up unsightly and unsettling contradictions, and refusing to be appropriated by any progressive queer politics. His writing has the capacity to disturb, perplex and offend as well as to lend crucial support and enable effective anti-heteronormative resistance.

CONCLUSION

Many years after his death, Marechera remains a haunting figure on the Zimbabwean literary and cultural scene. He also holds profound political significance for his uncompromising stance against tyranny. Efforts to bury “the doppelganger”, to draw closure on his enduring significance, have proved futile. Refusing to rest in peace, he continues to resurface as a poignant commentator on contemporary issues – an enfant terrible whose speciality is to disclose unsettling realities.

This thesis has argued Zimbabwean literature is alive with inter-author, inter-textual dialogue and Marechera is an inescapable point of reference. He moves backwards to reconnect with Lessing on the theme of forbidden interracial intimacy and forwards to enter contemporary feminist and queer debates, rekindling these with an insightful, though controversial, stance. I have argued his relevance to anti-racist, feminist, and queer critical studies despite, and in fact because of, his propensity to problematise and complicate issues of identity.

In content and in form, Marechera was, as Nyamfukudza comments, many years ahead of his time: “Dambudzo was the first Zimbabwean to take such an adventurous approach. It is a pity that Zimbabwe and Zimbabwean literature wasn’t ready for him” (quoted in Pattison 2001: 238). However, there are now signs of experimentalism on the literary landscape, in his wake – a point I have made regarding Vera and Chinodya especially.

In Zimbabwean literature, Marechera holds an extra-ordinary significance. His unflinching exploration of the psychosexual, his refusal of cohesion and closure in form, his total rejection of teleology and historical continuity, his wilful complication, his ambivalence, his excess, his spilling over and out of theoretical frames, his transgression of his own transgressions are uniquely characteristic.

Vera, now celebrated as the most progressive, innovative author in recent criticism, as is witnessed by several essays in *Sign and Taboo* (2003), perhaps comes closest to Marechera in terms of her surreal aesthetic, her iconoclasm and her partial rejection of teleology, most apparent in *Under the Tongue* where “History had become dazed and circular” (Vera 1996: 112). Significantly, with Vera, however, it is a temporary

departure from history. Marechera's, much more controversially, is a permanent severance. Like Marechera, she foregrounds transgressions of sexuality and confronts – rather than ignores – social taboos such as abortion, rape, incest, and child-abuse. A crucial distinction I have argued, though, is that whereas Vera earnestly engages in a progressive transformative nation-building project (of which *Nehanda*, discussed in Chapter Two, is the prime example), Marechera eschews the concept of the writer as a social-worker and refuses to participate in any ideological project whatsoever. Vera's explorations and transgressions are limited, to some extent, I have argued, by her commitment to nation-building ideals. She is transgressive of male-dominated cosmologies but within the remit of an ideological project. Marechera's transgressions, by way of contrast, know no boundaries.

This thesis has shown two major instances where Marechera, on taboo topics, goes beyond all other writers, including Vera. On interracial sexuality, Vera has gestured towards but not yet ventured into Marecheran territory. She has also yet to seriously consider questions of queerness, although suggestions of same-sex desire in her writing have been the subject of a queer reading (Boehmer 2002). In this sense, at least, Marechera's inward gaze, his complication of questions of identity, runs deeper than Vera's. She, on the other hand, has confronted and transformed, to some extent, phallogentric and misogynist perspectives in fictional accounts of the nation, while Marechera, in feminist critiques, can be accused of these.

In men's writing, most notably Chinodya gestures towards a new experimental self-reflexive aesthetic, reminiscent of Marechera. In *Can We Talk*, his first person narrator reflects that: "Writing is a kind of sex. A ruthless, obsessive sex. Which is why writers and artists (male ones, that is) can never escape from women, or the idea of femininity" (Chinodya 2001 [1998]: 142). Unconscious forces, in his view, are inseparable from the production of narrative. This echoes Marechera who wrote in *Mindblast*, some fourteen years earlier, that:

Sexual relationships discover in ourselves unknown characteristics of the awful daemon. That too is perhaps the hidden theme here. For writing, full and unrelenting writing, is sexual. The writer and his work are partners in a sweet and horrible ancient rule; the ritual of evoking the daemon (Marechera 1984: 125).

To engage in intertextual dialogue with Marechera, as Chinodya clearly does, is to debate the significance of the psychosexual. This, I have shown, is increasingly being acknowledged as central to questions of personal identity and human relationships in contemporary Zimbabwean literature. There are limits, though, to Chinodya's explorations. Like Marechera, Chinodya explores interracial desire (although briefly), and exposes cracks in classic masculinity, but unlike Marechera he restores stability to the idea of essential masculine and feminine identities. Although Chinodya deviates from traditional styles and begins to dig beneath surface realities, marking a possible new direction in his writing, he does not yet venture as far as Marechera into the inner world of psychic labyrinths. Also, while he investigates sexuality and strained gender relationships, he does not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal, heteronormative status quo.

Nyamfukudza, a neglected though key commentator on sexuality, presents another important point of comparison. His naturalistic writing, about ordinary individuals shaped by deterministic forces, both external and internal (biological/libidinal) drives, is more conventional in form. Nevertheless, there is a powerful undercurrent of transgression – a subversion of social taboo in Nyamfukudza's writing, coupled with an exploration of the psychosexual. *Unkind Monologue*, for example, is a short story detailing the existential reflections of a man who has betrayed his wife, Rudo, by having sex with her younger sister. The narrator reflects that:

Both of us seemed to have been numbed into a new, fraught and forbidden dimension in which our awareness of what was proper, one might even say what was moral, remained tinglingly alive, yet also anesthetised, relegated into a limbo of temporary if still watchful inaction. Perhaps that is how the homicidal mind permits one to commit the dreadful act, the intelligence is split into two, so to speak, the one half fully sentient and logical, wholly alive to the horror and perfidy, yet able only to watch its murderous, practical alter ego without interfering (Nyamfukudza 1991: 67).

This is where Nyamfukudza comes closest to discerning, like Marechera, a fundamental psychic split in the individual subject. However, the troubling implications of psychic disunity are constrained and explained by a calm, sober, meditative voice of the male

narrator (who speaks ‘rationally’ about the women as well as himself).

With Nyamfukudza, sexuality brings existential absurdities to the fore, in many ways in a philosophical dialogue with Marechera, who does the same, but whose speculations about human existence are framed quite differently – if they are framed at all. They are often presented through a radically fragmented consciousness that expresses itself clearly one minute, only to revise and undercut itself the next (as in the doppelgänger scene in *Black Sunlight*, discussed in Chapter Three). With Marechera there is no calm, collected reasoning to bring closure to unsettling ontological questions in the cold light of day, no universal maxims sealed off by the form of the narrative body, no closure at all. Also, although Nyamfukudza examines contradiction and irrational behaviour, he nevertheless restores an essential stability and unity in his characters and his narrative. Vera as well, despite her anti-realism, still invokes closure (as we have seen in *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins*, discussed in Chapter Two). Chinodya, however, tentatively moves away from closure (ending with an uninterpreted dream in *Play Your Cards*, for example, discussed in Chapter One).

Marechera differs from each of these writers in his representation of permanently unsettling realities. His transgressions exceed those of any other Zimbabwean writer to date. They have also transcended the bounds of conventional literary criticism. The ethos, described by the author as a type of “[i]ntellectual anarchism[,] is full of contradictions in the sense that it can never achieve its goals. If it achieves any goal at all, then it is no longer anarchism. And so one has to be in a perpetual state of change, without holding on to any certainties” (Veit-Wild 1992: 31). Accordingly, subversion, destabilisation and radical self-reflection never end with Marechera.

Although he has been heralded as a literary genius in some quarters (Murwisi 1995/6; Musandireve 1996), he has also been described as self-indulgent, ‘wild’, excessive and even offensive in others. As yet, literary criticism has struggled to speak simultaneously of his crucial importance to Zimbabwean (and postcolonial) literature, at the same time as addressing the profoundly unsettling, frequently problematic, features of his writing. I have, in this thesis, argued the importance of doing both.

The most recent piece of full-length criticism of Marechera, Pattison’s *No Room for Cowardice*, irons out contradiction in the author’s writing – diagnosing and explaining

it, problematically, as the product of a unique psychopathology. This approach ‘makes safe’, for the critic and the reader, an author who, I have argued, is quite the opposite. It is never ‘safe’ to read Marechera: to engage with his writing is to move into a world without fixed meanings, where personal identity is in a permanent state of flux. It is more challenging and fruitful for readers and critics, I have suggested, to pursue the wider implications of this, rather than attempting an ‘explanation’ of the author’s eccentricity by recourse to normative versions of reality.

We have to admit, however, that in the process of transgressing the status quo and refusing oppressive structures, Marechera also shocks, appals and disgusts many readers. *Fuzzy Goo’s Guide (to the earth)*, for example, written provocatively for the “Children Theme” of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair’s Writers Workshop in 1987, incites anarchy.

If all the little human beings joined together in one terrible scream all the big ones would go mad and do horrible things in their bedrooms. That is how little human beings come into the world. Your father and mother go mad in the bedroom and then you are born nine months afterwards. If you see your mother’s stomach getting bigger and bigger it is not because she is drinking a lot of beer. It is because she has done horrible things with daddy and you are going to have another Blah little person for a brother or sister. That is when you know your mother has a horrible thing called a breast which the new horrible little person likes to suck just like a piglet. But before the horrible little person comes out kicking and screaming and spitting blood out of mother’s stomach, it is called a pig in a poke or a bun in the oven. It is very embarrassing to walk to school with a mother who is carrying a large pig in a poke. It is very blah. Very, very blah.

...

It is usually better to run away from home. All you need is a rucksack and a small tent. If you stay in society and the big ones want to beat up the other society next door they will put you into an army and you will get your small finger and private parts blown up with bombs. It is very painful. If you stay in society, the big ones will make you stand in line in the streets and wave stupid little flags and sing horrible national songs, and be kissed by the thick drunken

lips of the biggest of the human beings. They won't let you pee when you want to but when they want you to (Marechera 1994: 239-241)

Fuzzy Goo radically rejects normative versions of the family and society and calls up a dissident subjectivity within the young reader. A parent's and government's worst nightmare, it goes beyond social acceptability. And there can be no neat assimilation of Marechera's style or sentiments into progressive anti-establishment projects either. With its apparent elements of misogyny ("a horrible little thing called a breast"), and its frighteningly grotesque description of the sex act, *Fuzzy Goo's* advice also unsettles well-meaning ambitions to transform society.

This may seem a socially irresponsible philosophy but paradoxically, because Marechera champions the assertion of selfhood, he offers a route to self-empowerment, and has appealed to many who are marginalised and oppressed in Zimbabwean society for this reason. Asserting identity as a fiction, Marechera, more so than any other author, demonstrates why literature is vital to questions of personal identity and vice versa. He returns the means of identity construction to the individual, demonstrating the power of fiction to subvert, deconstruct, re-evaluate and re-invent identity. In short, he proposes literature as a site of resistance based on self-assertion. This is significant, as I have demonstrated, within the context of a persisting moral, social, and cultural hygiene discourse in Zimbabwe, open to manipulation by political forces. Marechera subverts this discourse, moving radically outside the tropes it has produced in the national literature.

At a moment in Zimbabwe's history where dissent is brutally being stifled, Marechera also represents a beacon of hope. He is a dangerous writer for totalitarian regimes, as *Fuzzy Goo's Guide (to the world)* so graphically demonstrates, because he threatens to produce sceptical, non-compliant readers and disobedient citizens. He is also pertinent at this time because, like no other author, he brings radical inward reflection, informed by Fanonian psychoanalysis, to Zimbabwean literature. It is becoming increasingly clear that a long-term solution to Zimbabwe's tragic antagonisms will need to take into account psychosexual realities – battles of race, gender and sexuality which continue to rage in the psychic world. Hence Marechera is a key figure for consideration, I suggest, as we contemplate the tensions in Zimbabwe and its fraught journey towards a changed future.

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